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Flatboat Fred, on the Mississippi.

BY EDWARD WILLETT.



SUDDENLY, AND WITHOUT THE SLIGHTEST WARNING, THE MONSTER ROSE UNDER THE SKIFF, UPSETTING IT
AND THROWING FRED AND HIS COMRADE INTO THE RIVER, ONE ON EACH SIDE OF ITS BACK,

Flatboat Fred

ON THE MISSISSIPPI;

OR,

The Voyage of the "Experiment."

BY EDWARD WILLETT,

AUTHOR OF "TIP TRESSELL," "SMART SIM,"
"WIDE-AWAKE GEORGE," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A SPARRING MATCH.

ON the muddy waters of the lower Mississippi a flatboat floated under the summer sun. This flatboat was not of the class that is styled broad-horn, nor was it one of a coal fleet. It was not loaded with hay, with hoop-poles, with staves, with earthenware, or with the black diamonds of the upper Ohio. It was much too small to take rank with such monsters of the flatboat tribe.

In length it was about thirty feet, and in breadth a third as much. It was dignified by four small windows, and was adorned with a coat of whitewash.

On each side was painted in large black letters the word "*Experiment*," which may be considered the name of the craft.

This box on a float had no propelling power, other than the current of the Mississippi; but it was not allowed to drift at the mercy of the current, its course being controlled by a long steering-oar, the handle of which projected over the slightly-rounded roof, and was managed from a straight plank across the roof that was known as the steering-bench.

The steering-bench, at the time when we overtake the flatboat, was occupied by two persons. One of them—a large man, somewhat fleshy, and with a decidedly German cast of countenance—was seated on the bench, placidly and silently smoking a long pipe.

The man at the oar was tall and strongly built, and had arrived at that uncertain period of life which is known as middle age. There were streaks of gray in his heavy brown beard, his abundant hair was worn rather long, and his eyes were blue, bright and restless. His head was covered with a dark felt hat, and he was clothed coarsely, but not shabbily.

"As I tell you, Herman Schweitopfel," the steersman was saying, "that Fred Light, the boss of this craft, is a fine young fellow; but I would like to know where he comes from."

"He cooms for by dot Muskingum walley in Ohio," said the other.

"He must be a good boxer, from what I have seen of him. I used to know how to use my hands pretty well myself, and I would like to have a round with him for fun."

"You wants dot, Mat Marsh? Dot would be peanuts for Fred Light. Ober here he cooms, oond he talks mit you about dot besser as I."

As the German spoke, a young fellow who might be regarded either as a lad or as a young

man, climbed up on the roof at the forward end of the flatboat.

Although hardly nineteen years old, he was tall for his age, and his lithe but sinewy form told of strength and agility. His handsome face, though sunbrowned, was fresh and healthy; his blue eyes were bright and clear, and his light hair clustered in crisp curls close to his head. He was neatly dressed, and his well-fitting summer suit did not conceal the faultless symmetry of his form.

"Dis vas a lively ragget, mine poy," said Herman Schweitopfel, as Fred Light approached the steering-bench. "Mat Marsh says he would like to put on dose gloses mit you, oond haf a leedle round."

"That's so," said Marsh, "I would like to try a bit of a sparring-match with you, Mr. Light."

"Please don't mister me, friend Marsh," replied Fred. "It would be nearer right if I should call you Mr. Marsh."

"Well, but what do you say to putting on the gloves with me?"

"All right, I will be glad to get a little exercise in that way. You are a bigger man than I am, Mat, but I think you will have to handle yourself pretty well if you hit me."

"Oh, I don't expect to get the better of you, if you are really a scientific boxer, as I have had no practice in a long time; but I hope to be able to touch you at least once."

"You shall have a fair chance. I will bring up the gloves in a minute."

The young fellow descended into the interior of the ark, and soon returned with two pairs of boxing gloves.

"Take the steering-oar, Herman," he said, "and you must act as referee and see fair play."

Mat Marsh and his young opponent laid aside their coats, and put on the gloves.

"If either of us happens to get knocked overboard," said Fred, "the others must fish him out. Now, come on! I see that you have a good guard."

They faced each other, and sparred for an opening, Fred being less cautious than his larger antagonist, whose evident want of practice caused him to confine his first efforts to self-defense. But he soon warmed up to his work, and made some rattling play, that caused his young antagonist to open his eyes as he danced about, as lively as a cricket.

Watching his chance, the youth retaliated by getting in a body blow that taught his opponent to be more careful in his attacks.

"Look out, now!" said Fred. "I am going to give you a sockdolager right under your left eye, and I mean to strike under your arm to do it. That's the point for you to watch."

As this warning was evidently given in good faith, Marsh directed all his efforts to guarding against that mode of attack, with the view of preventing the threatened hit.

But the lad, after a little preliminary sparring, rushed in as if he meant to break down his adversary's guard, feinted heavily with his left hand, and suddenly shot out the right, striking his antagonist on the left cheek-bone with a force that nearly tumbled him over on the deck.

"That will do," said Marsh, as he pulled off his gloves. "I have the most muscle, but you are way ahead of me in science."

"Suppose we practice now and then," suggested Fred Light. "It will be good exercise for us, and help to pass the time. Herman ain't a bad hand with his fists, though he is getting to be so big and clumsy."

"I don't suppose we will have much time for that sort of thing. We will be likely to reach your landing-place before to-morrow night."

"What do you know about my landing-place?" quickly asked Fred.

"Why, it seems to me that I shipped as a sort of a pilot."

"Yes; you said that you knew the river; but I have never told you where I expect to bring up."

"Perhaps I may know a thing or two, Fred Light, that you haven't told me. I know, for instance, that the expense of fitting up this boat and putting a stock of goods aboard never came out of your pocket. You were sent on this expedition by Charles Searcy, of St. Louis."

"That's a fact, though I don't know how you found it out. Do you know Mr. Searcy?"

"A little. How did you get acquainted with him?"

"I took a letter to him from a friend of mine. I suppose he praised me up right sharp, as the old gentleman cottoned to me, and seemed to think that I was just the chap to attend to some matters for him down this way."

"So he fitted out this craft," said Marsh, "and named her the 'Experiment,' and sent you down here to try an experiment for him."

"Do you know what sort of an experiment that is?" asked Fred.

"I have a sort of an idea about it. I know that Charles Searcy was broken up by the war, and that he lost his old homestead, which is known as the Searcy plantation, and that it is in the hands of strangers, and that he wants to know something about them, and to find out what chance he has to get it back. But I confess that I don't know just what he expects you to do."

"No more do I," replied Fred. "He said that I was to land at or near the Searcy plantation, and that I would know more in good time. I say, Mat Marsh, as you are so well up in this business, I would like to know whether you mean to stick to us, and whether we can rely on you to help us if we get into trouble."

"You may just bet your last dollar on that, my young friend," replied Marsh, as he stepped to the bench and took the steering-oar from the hands of Herman.

After this little sparring-match Fred Light and Herman Schweitopfel put their heads together in a private discussion of the strange pilot of the "Experiment."

"Queer chap, ain't he, Herman?" remarked the lad.

"Queer? Vell, I don't know about queer. He is a schmart feller. Aber how he knows so mooch by dose beeziness, dot is vot gets me away mit minesellef."

"Perhaps Mr. Searcy gave him a hint," suggested Fred. "Marsh says that he knows the old gen'leman a little."

"Mebbe dot vos so."

"But if Mr. Searcy has let him into the thing, Herman, he ought to have told us, so that we might know what to expect."

"Dot vos so, too."

"That Marsh knows a heap of things, Herman, more than we have any notion of, I reckon. He knows the river, and he talks like a college-taught man, and he ain't a bad hand with the gloves, and he speaks German, don't he?"

Herman nodded.

"And t'other day he hauled out of that old iron-bound trunk of his a book that was printed with queer letters, and read somethin' that I couldn't make head or tail of."

"Dot vas Greek, mine poy."

"Greek, was it? It sounded mighty grand. Strange that a man who knows Greek should be hired out to me, on this flatboat, for twenty dollars a month and his board."

"Fred Light! your landing is in sight."

The lad started, for this announcement was made by the man of whom he was speaking.

CHAPTER II.

A WARM RECEPTION.

FRED LIGHT hastily climbed up on the roof of the flatboat, followed more slowly by Herman.

Both were anxious to see the place which was to be the termination of their voyage, and where they might expect to remain for some time. The landing was especially attractive to Fred, whose duties had been vaguely described by his employer, and who was eager to enter upon tasks and adventures whose nature and extent he did not yet comprehend.

Mat Marsh had turned the head of the flatboat toward the shore when at some distance above the point at which he was aiming. The current had carried it in the right direction, and when he was joined by his companions the ark was not far from the bank.

As soon as he reached the roof Fred Light looked down the river and toward the shore. He saw nothing but a low bank, covered by a profusion of trees and bushes.

"Where is the landing?" he asked. "I don't see any sign of a landing."

"Right below us," replied Marsh, "where you see a sort of a clearing. The usual landing is around the bend; but I doubt if you would be allowed to land there, or if you would care to. This clearing is near the limit of the old Searcy plantation, if not beyond the line."

"You seem to know a heap about the place, and I guess we will have to use you for a pilot on the land, as well as on the water. But why couldn't we land further up, in the shade?"

"If the business you are on should bring you into any sort of trouble, I thought you might like to have an open space near the boat."

"That's a fact."

In a few minutes the steersman had brought the flatboat to the shore at the clearing of which he had spoken. Fred Light jumped ashore at the stern with a line, and soon the "Experiment" was moored, and a plank connected her with the land.

Marsh and Herman Schweitopfel followed the

lad ashore, glad to feel the ground under their feet again.

A survey of the locality showed them a cleared space of not more than two acres, which was then overgrown with low bushes and weeds. Beyond the clearing stretched a dense forest, the only opening through which was a narrow road, that seemed to be seldom if ever used. At the shore, the ground, covered with grass and weeds, sloped gradually to the water's edge—an unusual thing on the Mississippi—so that the "Experiment," as she lay at the bank, commanded a good view of the clearing.

"It ain't much of a place," remarked Fred; "and it is likely to be lonely enough, but I reckon we can stand it."

"We shall see what we shall see," replied Marsh. "We may have more company than we want, before the day is done."

To relieve the loneliness of the place, and to advance the supposed objects of the expedition, it was necessary to advertise the arrival of the "Experiment" and her cargo, and for this the party were prepared.

Mat Marsh went ashore, and soon succeeded in capturing a young native of the African persuasion, who was easily induced, under promise of pay, to take a quantity of printed announcements and distribute them among the inhabitants.

As Fred Light and his companions were arranging matters for the reception of possible customers, the lad shook his head sadly.

The "Experiment" was a store-boat, the greater part of the space under her roof being occupied for that purpose, and the shelves were filled with a brand-new assortment of dry goods and notions, various articles of hardware and crockery being added for the purpose of completing the stock.

"Everybody will set me down as a green-horn," said Fred. "I have tried to get the names and the prices of these things into my head; but they won't stick there worth a cent. I am afraid that I wasn't built up for a trader."

"Don't worry about that," replied Marsh. "I know the marks and the articles pretty well, and Herman is no slouch at selling goods. You can look on and boss the job, and I have no doubt that we will get along very well."

"It is a good thing that you know so much about this business, Mr. Marsh. But I wonder how you got hold of it. Did the old gentleman put you up to it?"

"What old gentleman?" asked Marsh.

"Mr. Searcy."

"He is not what I call an old man—not older than I am, I judge."

"Do you mean that? The man I were had a gray beard, and the few hairs that were left on his head were white."

"That must have been the managing clerk. Mr. Searcy seldom attends to business of late, but leaves most of his affairs in the charge of that old man."

"That is queer," said Fred. "Why don't he show up, himself?"

"He is absent a great deal, much of the time in Europe. He is a rich man, you see, and can afford to enjoy himself."

"If I have never seen him, how am I to know that I am all right in going into this thing?"

"Have you nothing to which his signature is attached? I think you spoke of a bill of sale of this craft and its contents."

"Yes, I've got that."

Fred produced the document, and showed it to Marsh, who assured him that it was signed with Mr. Searcy's name and by his own hand.

"I am glad to be sure of that," said the lad.

"Now I am ready for business, and I wish I knew for certain what sort of business it is that I am to do."

"You must have patience, and wait for something to turn up," replied Marsh.

"Here's your little darky turnin' up, and he will want his pay."

The small African crossed the clearing and entered the boat. He said that he had duly distributed all the handbills that had been given him, and had mentioned the arrival and the business of the "Experiment," among the scattered inhabitants of that region.

"Here come some customers already," said Fred, as he descended from the roof of the ark.

"Dey is a hard kind ob customers, boss," remarked the boy.

"Who are they?"

"De Bingley gang. Dar's Mart an' Sile an' Ben Bingley, an' de two Torbert boys. Golly! I want to git away from yar."

"You want your money, then? Here it is, bub. Scamper off, and come back to us to-morrow."

"All right, boss. Ise come back, ef thar's anyfin left to come back to," said the small African, as he hurried ashore and sneaked away.

This ominous remark caused Fred and his companions to look more closely at the approaching party.

They were five in number, and all were young men, the eldest not more than thirty years of age. They were sunbrowned and roughly dressed, and all had the appearance of being, as the boy had said they were, hard customers. Having ridden through the woods, they had left their horses at the edge of the timber, and were walking across the clearing.

"I reckon we had better be sure that we are well heeled," said Fred Light, as he led the way back into the ark.

When the five men crowded in Marsh was leaning against the counter, Herman was seated, stolidly smoking his pipe, and Fred, with his hands in his pockets, confronted the newcomers.

"Good evening, gentlemen," said the young proprietor of the establishment. "What can I do for you?"

"You kin trot out some whisky, and be sudden about it," replied the spokesman of the party.

"Sorry I can't accommodate you; but I don't keep whisky."

"Do you hear that, Sile? He says he don't keep whisky."

"That cock won't fight, Mart," replied the man who was addressed.

"Mr. Mart Bingley," said the lad, nodding

his head. "Glad to meet you. Hope you don't doubt my word."

"You seem to hev got hold of my name," said the spokesman, "but I'll be shot ef I ever saw you anywhar. I never heerd tell of a storeboat that didn't keep whisky, and you can't stuff that talk down me. Thar's whisky in this boat, and we mean to hev it, or thar'll be trouble."

Fred Light seemed to be looking out at the shadows cast by the setting sun, but in fact he was observing the men before him, and was measuring them. Two of them were tall and strong, two were men of medium size, and the fifth was a lean, loose-jointed fellow, who would not count for much in a tussle.

"Sorry you doubt my word, Mr. Bingley," said the lad. "I would be happy to supply you with whisky, or aquafortis, or strychnine, or anythin' that would suit your case, but we really don't keep any sort of p'ison on this craft."

Mart Bingley's face turned purple. The tone angered him, even more than the words.

"You are too cussed sassy, young chap," he said. "I reckon you need to be took down a peg or two. Just trot out that whisky now, mighty sudden, or we'll bu'st this shebang wide open."

Herman Schweitopfel laid his pipe on the floor and grunted. Mat Marsh was still leaning against the counter, but there was the light of battle in his eyes.

"Can't you have a little patience?" asked Fred. "It seems to me that it is a fight you are lookin' for. If that is what the matter is, just let any one of you step outside and I'll give him the best I've got in the shop."

"Smack him in the mouth, Mart!" shouted Sile Bingley.

"Break his blasted head!" urged another.

The lad's hands were still in his pockets; but his teeth were clinched, and his look meant mischief. Herman had risen to his feet, and Marsh had turned so that he faced the intruders.

"Pitch into 'em, boys!" exclaimed Mart Bingley. "Clean out the cussed sneaks!"

He led the attack; but his pitching in was suddenly stopped by a stunning blow between the eyes, as Fred's left fist shot out like a bolt from a rifled cannon.

The lad followed up his advantage in the liveliest style, and Herman's ponderous weight and Marsh's natural strength were immediately thrown into the contest.

So effective was the concerted action of the three defenders of the flatboat, that the struggle was over in a few minutes. The brawny but clumsy force of the intruders was at best hardly a match for the trained muscles of their antagonists, and they were so surprised and dazed by the rapidity with which the tables were turned upon them, that their efforts were much weaker than they otherwise might have been.

The scene was a lively one while it lasted. At its close Marsh and Herman picked up two of the assailants bodily, carried them out at the door, and flung them on the bank. The others, whose faces showed marks of injury in the encounter, gathered themselves together, and silently sneaked ashore.

On the bank they looked at each other, and

whispered, and Mart and Sile Bingley drew pistols from their hip pockets.

Instantly they found themselves covered by three rifles, cocked, and leveled at their heads.

The pistols were returned to the hip pockets, and they quietly moved away.

"Make the most of that, you dod-rotted hounds!" shouted Mart Bingley, as he turned and shook his fist at the flatboat. "You gave us a rough deal this time, but we mean to git even with you yet."

"We let you off easy this time," replied Marsh. "If you try that game again, you may count on getting hurt."

When the Bingley gang had mounted their horses and passed out of sight, the interior of the flatboat was straightened up, and seemed to be none the worse for the recent encounter.

"That's the first round for the 'Experiment,'" said Fred Light. "I hope we will have as good luck in the rest of 'em."

CHAPTER III.

A MAIDEN AND A MONSTER.

BUSINESS failed to open briskly on board the "Experiment" the next morning; but the prospects were not discouraging to the amateur traders.

A sun-burned young woman from the interior, accompanied by her brother, rode down to the boat, purchased some gaudy calico and other articles, and rode away.

The next arrival was a young man, who hitched his horse to the edge of the timber.

He was a tall, young fellow, not ill-looking, but awkward, sandy-haired, and somewhat freckled, and the stylish cut and quality of his garments could not conceal his rural breeding.

"Happy to see you, sir," said Fred Light. "What can I do for you this morning?"

"Well, I would like to look about a little, and maybe I may buy something, though I don't think of anything just now. Hope you don't object to loafing. If you do, say the word and I will light out. It is powerful lonesome about here, and I am keen for company."

"You are quite welcome," replied the lad, "provided that you are not hunting a fight, like some chaps who called on us last night."

"I heard that you had a rumpus with the Bingley gang, and that you cleaned them out. They've got enough to last them for a while, I hope; but there's no telling. They are a hard set. There ain't a bit of fight in me, unless I am nailed down to it. My name is Hicksey—Aaron Hicksey—and I own the old Hicksey place back here. Dad was killed in the war, and mammy died, and left the whole plantation on my hands. Well, I don't bother about it, but just let the niggers run it—the old hands, you know—and they do mighty well, it seems to me. Reckon they could cheat me out of my eye-teeth if they wanted to; but I don't believe they want to."

Fred Light introduced Aaron Hicksey to his companions, and the young man sat down and made himself at home. But his eyes were continually wandering outside, and the others, following his glances, soon saw somebody worth looking at.

This somebody was a young lady, who rode

directly down to the shore, accompanied by a negro.

"Does anybody ever walk, in these parts?" asked Fred.

"Scarcely," replied Marsh. "I fancy that some of the people would chase a horse about a ten-acre lot for an hour, and tire themselves out in catching him, rather than go half a mile afoot."

Aaron Hicksey retired into a corner when the young lady entered the boat, but Fred Light and his friends gazed at her with admiring eyes.

She was very young, probably not more than sixteen, and somewhat undersized, with remarkably small hands and feet, jet black hair and eyes, a clear olive complexion, pouting lips, and as bright, merry and saucy an expression of countenance as could be imagined. She was very neatly dressed, and her garments were highly becoming to her in cut and color and quality.

She skipped into the store-room of the "Experiment," nodding and smiling, and at once fastened on Fred as a salesman, asking him for some article of dry goods whose name quite bewildered him.

Mat Marsh came to the rescue of the lad, and explained to her that they did not have the article for which she inquired. Then she looked around at the establishment, and her gaze lighted on the young man in the corner.

"Why, Aaron!" she exclaimed. "You there? Who'd have thought it?"

She turned to the colored servant, who was standing outside.

"Jeff, I have lost my bracelet on the road. Go and look for it."

"I didn't see you have no bracelet, Miss Eva," replied the man.

"No matter what you saw or didn't see. Go and look for my bracelet."

The negro started across the clearing, and she turned to the others, with a bright smile.

"That's only a gag to get rid of him," she said. "Hope you don't mind. You see, I want to say a word or two to Aaron here, and my guardy won't let Aaron come to his house. My name is Eva Summers, and my guardy is Judge Searle—Judge Madison Searle—who owns the big plantation around the bend."

"Is it the place that is known as the Searcy plantation?" asked Marsh.

"I believe it used to go by that name."

"And Madison Searle is your guardian?"

"Yes; but—" she added, with a gush of frankness—"I don't take much stock in him. Sometimes I feel as if I wouldn't give a cent for him."

"Is he a judge of any court about here?"

"Not that I know of. He don't seem to be a judge of anything but something good to eat and drink. We are rich as mud over there, but sorter crank-sided somehow. Oh, it's a queer shebang; but I get plenty of everything except Aaron. Run along now, please. I want to talk to Aaron."

"I will go and help Jeff look for your bracelet."

The conversation that ensued between Eva Summers and Aaron Hicksey was quite animated on the part of the young lady, but rather

bashful on the part of the young man, and was regarded with no favorable eye by Fred Light. It lasted until the return of Marsh with the colored servant.

"I couldn't find no bracelet nowhar, Miss Eva," said the latter.

"Well, never mind, Jeff; there's plenty more where that came from. Gracious me! I forgot about the things I wanted to buy."

She hurriedly bought a few articles, without seeming to care what she got, or the prices she paid, and was assisted to mount her horse.

"Farewell, folks," she said, with her brightest smile. "I mean to look in on you again, if you don't mind. So-long, then!"

She was hardly out of sight when Aaron Hicksey, after making a few purchases, and thanking his new friends for their kindness, also left the boat.

"What do you think of that?" asked Fred Light, turning to his companions.

"Dot leedle girrel is yoost so lofely like an anshel," replied Herman.

"She is very pretty, indeed," said Marsh, "and very peculiar."

"What do you mean by peculiar?" asked Fred.

"Did not her style of talking strike you as being somewhat peculiar? For a girl of her position she is very slangy. She lives on the old Searcy plantation, the very point at which we are aiming, and she says that Madison Searle is her guardian. He must be wealthy, if she is not, and it is to be supposed that she has been well educated and cared for. But what sort of company must she keep, to pick up such slang? She said that she 'don't take much stock' in Searle, that the people at the plantation are 'sorter cranksided,' and that it is 'a queer shebang.' Her style of speaking shows that it must be decidedly queer."

"She is a little off in her chin music," remarked Fred; "but, goodness gracious! ain't she a stunner for pretty? Bright as a new dollar, too. It's a thunderin' shame that she should take up with such a calf as that Aaron Hicksey."

"Don't make any mistake about Hicksey," said Marsh. "He may not be such a fool as he looks to be. I am inclined to believe that there is good stuff in him."

The remainder of the day was uneventful; but the experimenters on board of the "Experiment" were not to go to bed without learning something more of the wonders of the region which they had visited.

After dark the three comrades were seated on the roof of the boat. The night was clear, and the moon, though near its setting, silvered the muddy waters of the Mississippi. Marsh was smoking a cigar. Herman was smoking his usual pipe, and Fred was doing nothing but gaze at the river. Perhaps he found there a reflection of the pretty face of saucy Eva Summers.

Suddenly the attention of the three was attracted by a noise in the water near them. It was a subdued, hollow, regular sound, somewhat like the escaping steam of a distant high-pressure steamboat. But there was no steamboat in sight, nor any kind of craft, except a

broadhorn which was slowly moving down the middle of the river.

This noise, although it was indistinct, clearly proceeded from the water, and a slight commotion of the surface could be seen, at a little distance below the flatboat, as if directly over some marine monster that was slowly making its way up-stream.

"Do you hear that?" asked Fred.

Yes, they all heard it.

"What is it?"

That was a question which neither of his comrades was prepared to answer.

"I have heard strange stories about catfish," he said. "Some folks say that they can sing, and an old flatboatman told me that he had been kept awake at night by the grunting and howlin' of the big ones. Perhaps he didn't tell such a big lie, after all."

"I don't believe that thing is any kind of a catfish," said Marsh, almost in a whisper.

The strange noise and the accompanying ripples had been slowly advancing up-stream, until they were nearly opposite the "Experiment."

Just as Marsh spoke, something came to the surface of the water at the distance of some thirty yards from the flatboat. It was black, rounded, and highest at the middle, tapering down to the water at each end. From the position of the gazers it looked like the back of a very large fish.

But it was a queer fish. At the upper end, near the surface of the water, was something like a horn, short and broad at the base, and from this horn came a gleam of light.

As the gleam shot out, a stream of water rose just before it, a short distance into the air, with a noise like that of escaping steam.

The gazers were silent. Perhaps it was the moonlight that made them look so pale; perhaps the sight of that mysterious river monster had paralyzed their nerves. A man who is brave enough before an enemy whom he knows and understands may shrink with terror from that which is unknown and indescribable.

Fred was the first, not to break the silence, but to act.

Remembering the Bingley raid, and considering it possible that he might see a duck, he had brought up his rifle, and it lay at his side.

Raising it to his shoulder, he took a quick aim before his comrades could interfere, and fired at the supposed back of the monster, which was then at about the same distance from the flatboat as when it was first seen.

The bullet fairly struck the target at which it was aimed, glanced off with a metallic ring, and dropped into the water at a considerable distance from the shore.

Suddenly and silently the monster sunk out of sight, leaving nothing but bubbles to show where it had gone down.

Each of the three watchers drew a long breath of relief. But for a few moments they did nothing but gaze in silence at the water.

Would the monster come up again? Would it show fight? What kind of a creature was it?

Mat Marsh was the first to speak.

"That was no fish," he said.

"What was it, then?" asked Fred Light.

"That is more than I can tell you; but it cannot be a fish. Would a rifle bullet have bounded off from a fish's back as that did?"

"Some fishes have mighty tough hides," replied Fred. "The alligator is a sort of fish, and a bullet has to hit just so to fetch him."

"Did you ever see an alligator so far up the river?"

"Don't know that I did. But perhaps the great granddaddy of all the alligators has come up on a voyage of discovery, startin' what they call an exodus nowadays."

"It is no joking matter, Fred. Would an alligator, or any fish that swims, have shown such a light?"

The lad did not attempt to answer that question.

"I can't guess what the thing was," continued Marsh; "but I do not believe it was a fish."

"Dot vas der tyfel," said Herman—"nottings but der tyfel. Aber I hope he feels himsellef besser for dot schwim."

Nearly an hour longer the three watchers sat on the roof of the flatboat, discussing the strange appearance, and looking for its return; but they neither saw nor heard anything more, and finally they went to bed.

CHAPTER IV.

THE MONSTER AT WORK.

THE watchers on the "Experiment" were not the only people who were disturbed by the river monster that night.

It has been said that a large broadhorn was seen slowly floating down the Mississippi.

The man who stood on the steering-bench, managing the long oar that was used as a rudder, heard a strange noise in the water, and called to a man who was at the other end of the boat.

Before his comrade could reach him, a slight shock was heard, as if the side or bottom of the flatboat had struck something.

"Did you hear that queer noise in the water, Jim?" he asked.

"Yes. What was it?"

"Darned ef I know. Thunderation! what's the matter with this tarnal flat, anyhow?"

The ungainly craft was not only going downstream, but was also sensibly approaching the shore, though there was no known reason why she should take that direction. At the same time the peculiar noise in the water was heard, though less plainly than before.

"It seemed like we struck a snag," said the steersman, "though I would bet my last dollar that the water here is too deep for that. And now we're goin' in to'ard shore, though the current is as straight as a shingle. Bear a hand, Jim, and let's try to lift her out o' this."

The two men tugged at the steering-oar, but their utmost efforts did not serve to change the course of the big craft.

All hands were called, and the sweeps were manned and worked with the full strength of the crew; but, in spite of everything the flatboat still held her course toward the shore.

As soon as she touched the bank, about a dozen men suddenly came out from behind the trees, and leveled as many rifles at the heads of the five flatboatmen.

The latter perceived at once that they were overpowered, and made no attempt at resistance. Being ordered to throw up their hands and surrender, they obeyed at once, and one of the men on shore took a line from the flatboat, which he made fast to a tree.

While a portion of the nocturnal plunderers guarded the prisoners, the others searched their persons and the boat, carrying off everything of value except the cargo of hay.

While the victims were helplessly watching these operations, they saw something round and dark, like the back of a huge fish, rise to the surface of the water at a little distance above the flatboat. But it could not be a fish, as there was a strange hump or horn on its back, from which a gleam of light shot out on the river.

As they watched it, shivering with fear, it sunk, and was seen no more.

The work of plunder was soon finished, the prize was cast loose, and the marauders disappeared in the gloom.

The flatboatmen wearily navigated their awkward craft back into the channel, and went their way, poorer in pocket, but richer in a story which was so incredible that they doubted whether they would dare to tell it.

Shortly after this event two men were seated in a large room in the old but still stately mansion on the Searcy plantation.

The room had formerly been the main parlor of the old house, but then had little of the appearance of a parlor, being, like the rest of the estate, quite untidy and dilapidated.

A strange thing about the Searcy mansion was the scarcity of female occupants. There was plenty of men, and the cooking was done by men, and the house was cared for after a fashion by men; but only one of its many inhabitants was of the softer sex.

One of the two persons was Madison Searle, commonly known as Judge Searle—an elderly man, stout and full-bodied, with a purple face. His rosy complexion was scarcely suggestive of good health, as it was seamed and veined in a manner that spoke of rich living and heavy drinking. A bottle and glasses, on the table by which he was seated, gave point to this impression.

The other man, who was considerably younger than Madison Searle, was swarthy, black-bearded, and coarsely dressed.

"Here's the bottle, Tyson," said the elder. "Why don't you help yourself and be sociable?"

"Thanky, Cap, but I'm a man who knows when he has got enough, and I think it would be better for you if you didn't help yourself quite so often."

"That's nonsense, Tyson. I know what I need, and what I've got to have. As long as I stick to my regular allowance I am all right. If anything should happen to shut it off, I would drop into my grave so quick that it would make your head swim."

"Somethin' like eatin' arsenic, hey? That's a bad state of things, Cap. As you are likely to drop off 'most any day, don't you think we ought to take account of stock, and know just how we stand?"

"I hope you don't think, Tyson, that I would try to take an advantage of any of you."

"Of course not; but some of the boys have a notion that the profits of the business have been bigger than the returns; and you ought to satisfy them that everything is all right."

"The expenses have been heavier than they think. Well, I will get Harry and you together, and try to foot up the thing. Hello, missy! What do you want?"

This question was addressed to the only female occupant of the mansion, no other than black-eyed Eva Summers.

"You may bet your bottom dollar that I don't want any brandy," she answered. "But I do want something else, guardy, and you've got to give it to me. You know that there is a trading-boat lying at the river, up around the bend."

"I have heard that some such thieving mud-turtle has landed hereabout."

"It ain't a thieving mud-turtle. I went there—with Jeff, of course—and bought a few things, and they are just the nicest kind of people; and I want you to ask them here to dinner."

"Ask them to dinner? I? Child, you are crazy!"

"Now, guardy, that's played out. I've got heaps of patience, but I ain't old man Job. I mean to have my way once in a while, or there's going to be a row. I want you to ask Aaron Hicksey, too."

"I tell you, Eva, if that fellow ever puts his foot in this house, I will break his head!"

"Bet you won't. You don't suppose, guardy, that I have trained so long with this crowd without knowing what's going on. I've got a tongue, too, as well as eyes and ears, and wouldn't it raise a merry hallelujah, if I should turn that tongue loose?"

"You don't mean to say that you would tell—"

"Wouldn't I, though? There's no sayin' what I might do, if you should make me mad. Is it all right, guardy?"

"I will think about it."

"That means that you will keep on the safe side of me, and will consent. Day-day!"

She whisked out of the room, and Madison Searle swallowed a glass of brandy.

"That's a little too much!" he said, with an oath.

"I would like to know who is the boss on this plantation?" said Tyson. "Who is that girl, anyhow? Where did you pick her up?"

"I didn't pick her up. She was left to me—a sort of a legacy, and my conscience won't let me—"

"That'll do, Cap!" interrupted Tyson. "When it comes to questions of conscience, don't argy them afore me."

"The fact is, Tyson, that I've got a tender side to me, and she sticks there. If she would marry my son, it would be all right. She could raise the deuce with us, if she should ever turn her tongue loose."

"But it would be easy enough to tie that tongue of hers. What are you going to do about it, Cap?"

"Of course it won't do to have those folks

here. I have never allowed any company on this place yet, and I can't make an exception in their favor. Besides, I have my suspicions about that confounded flatboat."

"From what I have heard of the men who are on her," suggested Tyson, "they don't seem to be the common sort of traders."

"Just so. Who knows what cussed spies and intruders may come down here, pretending to be traders? I don't want them around, in any shape. As soon as that flatboat came in sight, I told the Bingley boys to lay for her and clean her out."

"That game didn't work, Cap."

"Not worth a cent. Those folks seem to be willing and able to fight. But I know what I can do."

"What's that?"

"That flatboat will sink right soon, so easy and so sudden that those folks won't know what hurt them."

A bell that hung against the wall began to jingle.

"The Devilfish is in," said Searle. "I will see Harry and fix it up with him. In the meantime I will give the girl taffy and put her off."

CHAPTER V.

SEEKING AND FINDING.

THROUGH the wood and across the clearing, down to the bank where the "Experiment" lay, came men piloted by the small African who had distributed the advertising circulars.

One was a smooth-faced young fellow, with a bright, intelligent countenance, who had a sort of haversack slung under his left arm. The other was middle-aged, bearded, with a carpet bag in his hand. Both carried rifles.

The three traders and Aaron Hicksey were seated on the bank, and the younger of the two visitors at once picked out Fred.

"This is Fred Light, I suppose," he said. "I have a letter of introduction to you, from Mr. Searcy of St. Louis; or rather from his managing clerk, who is well acquainted with you. My name is Bradley, generally called Billy Bradley, and I am a newspaper reporter."

"Glad to see you," said Fred. "We are gettin' lonesome down here. By the way, what is this that Mr. Dalby says you have come to look after?"

"It may sound rather ridiculous," replied the reporter; "but the fact is that we are hunting a river dragon. The St. Louis papers have had reports lately of some frightful sort of a monster—either a beast or a fish, or a sea-serpent—that has been seen in the river near this place. People have laughed at the stories, and have accused us of manufacturing them, but they were told by men from down the river, who evidently believed them, and whom we had good reason to believe. As I was going to have a vacation I got permission to come down here and look into the thing."

"Is your friend a reporter too?" asked Fred.

"Oh, no! I will introduce him. This is Mr. Harvey Storms, a man about town, with plenty of money and plenty of time, who is fond of adventure, and who kindly consented to come and help me hunt the monster."

"Well, Mr. Bradley, that is the very thing we were speaking about as you came down to the river."

"What, the dragon? Have you seen it?"

"Yes. We have all seen it, and I have shot at it."

"What did it look like? Did you hit it?"

The youth told the story of the adventure with the river monster.

"I thought it might be a big alligator, or perhaps an escaped sea-lion," said Harvey Storms, who spoke in a slow and drawling tone; "but it seems to be something worse than that."

"Our friend Aaron Hicksey lives here, and has known of it for some time," suggested Mat Marsh.

The reporter hastened to pump Aaron for further information.

"I never saw it," replied the young man, "but I have heard of it often enough. It has nearly scared the life out of some of the niggers, and I don't know one of them who is now willing to go near the river after dark."

"I am of Mr. Marsh's opinion," said Storms.

"I don't think it can be a fish."

"It is more likely to be some piece of human deviltry," said Marsh.

"Dot vas nottings but der tyfel," said Herman.

"I have heard old boatmen say that the front door of hell is right under New Madrid," remarked Fred Light. "Like enough there is a back door down this way, and the Old Boy comes up now and then, as Herman says, to take a swim."

"I am glad I came down here," said Billy Bradley, "and I am going to find out what the thing is if it takes a leg."

"We will help you as much as we can," said Fred, "and Mr. Hicksey and I are goin' to scout around and look for the critter to-night. I don't suppose you gentleman have found any place to stay; but we will be glad to have you bunk with us, if you can stand our style."

This invitation was cordially accepted, and the traders and Aaron Hicksey were soon on excellent terms with their new friends.

"By the way," suggested Featherweight, "if the Bingley gang should come for our scalps again, couldn't we give 'em a sharp old settin' down?"

As Fred Light and Aaron Hicksey had agreed to cruise in search of the monster that night, they prepared for the expedition shortly after dark, each buckling upon his person a belt containing a revolver and a knife.

"I shouldn't wonder if this is goin' to be a ticklish kind of a scout," observed Fred. "I hope you ain't afraid, Aaron."

"I don't believe I am," replied Aaron. "Some folks are in the habit of saying that I haven't got sense enough to get scared, and I don't know but they are about right. I am glad that you are willing to let me go with you."

"But if you should get wiped out in this business, my friend, don't you suppose that Miss Eva Summers might miss you right badly?"

"I am afraid she wouldn't, Fred. I have been hoping that she might care as much as that for me, but it don't look like it. She only takes

up with me because company is scarce, and because she wants to have some fun and bother her guardian."

The two young men got into the small skiff belonging to the "Experiment," and shoved off, followed by the good wishes of their friends.

Fred took the oars, and Aaron sat in the stern to direct the course of the little craft.

They went down the river, and rounded the bend, rowing easily and with little noise, and keeping near the shore. Aaron constantly looked over the water, ahead and at the side of the skiff, and Fred was not so busy with his oars as to be unable to glance around occasionally.

About a quarter of a mile below the bend Aaron pointed out a large house, dimly visible in the darkness through the trees.

"That is the old Searcy house," he said, "where Judge Searle and Eva live."

Fred rested his oars, and inspected the house and the surroundings as well as he could.

"By the way, Aaron," he asked, "why is it that Judge Searle, as they call him, won't allow you to come on his place?"

"Because he thinks I want to marry Eva. That's one reason, I suppose. Then, again, he knows that I have suspicions about the way he got hold of the Searcy property, and about his goings on generally. Anyhow, he don't encourage company."

"Perhaps you will tell me more about these matters some time."

"Yes, I've no objection."

Just below the mansion a small inlet or bayou ran into the land. It was heavily timbered on each side, and terminated, at the distance of some sixty yards from the river, in a dense mass of foliage.

After the skiff had passed the inlet, Aaron Hicksey proposed that they should turn and go back, steering a course further from shore than that which they had taken when they came down.

The boat was turned, Aaron taking the oars, and he pulled leisurely up-stream, Fred Light keeping a sharp lookout ahead and on both sides of the skiff.

They had just passed the Searcy mansion, when Fred, with a sudden cry, half rose from his seat.

"Hold hard!" he exclaimed. "Back water, Aaron. *There it is!*"

Right before the skiff rose the dark, round form of the river monster, and from the short horn on its back came a gleam of light, that shone on Aaron Hicksey's back and in Fred Light's face.

Aaron backed water with all his might, and then turned to get a look at the wonder. He was just in time to see it sink beneath the surface of the river.

Fred had drawn his pistol from his belt, and he fired at the light as it went down, but missed it.

The two youths looked at each other. Both were pale, and their lips were closed tightly, and for awhile neither of them spoke.

"That was it," said Fred at last.

"I didn't get a squint at it," replied Aaron.

By this time the skiff had drifted down until

it was below the Searcy mansion, and Aaron took the oars to pull up-stream again.

"I wish I could have hit it," said Fred. "I fired at the light, but I guess I must have been a little flustered."

"It don't seem to be inclined to bite anybody," remarked Aaron.

Suddenly, and without the slightest warning, the monster rose under the skiff, upsetting it, and throwing Fred and his comrade into the river, one on each side of its back.

Fred Light was so astonished, not to say frightened, by this sudden disaster, that he sunk as soon as he went into the water; but the instinct of self-preservation caused him to strike out, and he came immediately to the surface.

He looked around. The monster had gone down, the skiff was bottom upward, and the oars were floating near him.

Aaron Hicksey was there, too; but what was the matter with him?

He had told Fred that he was a good swimmer; but he was throwing his hands helplessly about, and he uttered a cry as his head went under the water.

The thought that Aaron had been seized and carried down by the monster struck a chill to the heart of Fred.

Without stopping to reflect, the brave lad drew a knife from his belt, and followed his friend into the depths.

As he blindly moved about in the muddy water, his feet struck something hard, and his left hand came in contact with a woolen garment that seemed to be attached to the hard substance.

Believing that it was Aaron's coat that was fastened to the monster, he cut it loose by a vigorous slash with his knife.

Although he had been under the water but a very short time, he had held his breath as long as was possible, and with a kick he sent himself up.

When he reached the surface, Aaron Hicksey was there, exhausted and gasping, but still able to swim.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FATE OF THE "EXPERIMENT."

FRED LIGHT swam to the boat, which was still floating near them, righted it, and pushed it to Aaron. He bailed out a portion of the water with his hat, and both of them got in and bailed out the rest. The oars were easily picked up, and Fred Light seated himself to row, while his friend took a position in the stern.

"The thing did seem to be inclined to bite, Aaron," observed Fred.

"I ain't sure about that," replied Aaron. "It upset us, but it may not have meant to do so. Likely as not my coat caught on that horn or something else, and I was pulled down with it."

"That was what I cut loose, and I owe you a coat."

"I owe you my life, you had better say, and you may bet your last dollar that I will never forget the debt."

"We both owe that critter somethin' for givin' us a duckin', and for my part, I am half crazy to get even."

"So am I; but we don't seem to have any show. What are you going to do now, Fred?"

"I am rowing up the river, as you see. I suppose we may as well get back to the flatboat."

The skiff at this time was nearly opposite the inlet just below the Searcy mansion.

"What's that, Fred?" exclaimed Aaron, in a stage whisper. "*There it is again!*"

Fred turned quickly, and saw the dark, round back of the monster lying above the surface of the water, between the skiff and the shore. But the horn that seemed to indicate its head was not turned toward the boat, and the light that streamed from it pointed directly into the bayou.

The next moment it sunk, but the bubbles that rose to the surface, and the strange, churning noise under the water told of its whereabouts.

"Now we can follow it," said Fred, in a resolute tone, though his face was pale. "The bubbles are going straight into the bayou. Watch them, Aaron, and guide me as I row."

"Our pistols are spoiled by the water, and we can't fight anything."

"Never mind that. They wouldn't help us, anyhow. I mean to see what becomes of that crittur, if I never see anythin' else in this world."

Aaron made no further objection, but directed the course of the skiff by motioning with his hands, while Fred rowed slowly and as silently as possible into the bayou.

Into the smooth, dark inlet they went, into the shadow of the tall trees that lined the banks, and Aaron was obliged to keep his eyes strained to watch the bubbles that occasionally rose to the surface. But it was clear that the monster under the water was steering a straight course to the head of the inlet, and in that direction Fred rowed the skiff.

As they went on the channel narrowed, the shadows grew heavier, and they could see that the head of the inlet was closed by a mass of foliage that rested on the surface of the water.

Right into the mass of leaves the youth sent the skiff with a strong pull, shipping the oars as it entered the gloom. When its course was stopped by the overhanging vines and bushes he pushed them aside and forced his way through, until he met an unexpected obstruction.

This was a strong and heavy iron door or gate, which was evidently so arranged that it could be raised and lowered with the rise and fall of the river, as it then extended a short distance below the surface of the water.

He listened at this gate, but heard nothing. He felt of it as high as he could reach, and drew the skiff to each side as far as it could be made to go, but found only the same iron obstacle.

Convinced that there was nothing more to be discovered, he drew the skiff back out of the mass of bushes, took up the oars and silently rowed out of the inlet. Then, as he pulled up the river, he gave an account of his exploration to Aaron Hicksey, who had remained seated in the stern while his companion prosecuted his discoveries.

"Queer sort of a den, that, Aaron," he said. "I don't know what it can be."

"Nor I, unless it is a boat-house."

"Nobody would have any call to build such a boat-house. We have found the home of that confounded crittur, anyhow, and I wish I knew a way to get into it."

"I can't think of any way, unless a fellow should dive under the gate. I reckon you wouldn't like to try that plan, Fred."

"You may bet I wouldn't, unless I was sure of coming up on the other side."

"It has just occurred to me, Fred, that there may be another way of getting in there."

"What is that?"

"The gate, or whatever you call it, must belong to some sort of a building, and the building is on the Searcy place, near the house."

"That's a fact, Aaron. We must get around that house, and into it, in spite of anybody and everybody."

It was late at night when they got back to the "Experiment," but they found their friends sitting on the roof, waiting and watching for them, uneasy at their long absence.

They related their adventures in search of the monster, to the delight of Billy Bradley, who got an exciting story for his newspaper; to the great wonderment of Herman Schweitkopf, who congratulated Fred on his escape from the clutches of "der tyfel," and somewhat to the enlightenment of Mat Marsh and Harvey Storms.

"There are a few points to be noted in this matter," said Marsh. "It is not to be supposed that the thing you were after could have its quarters in Madison Searle's boat-house, or whatever it is, without his knowing that it was there and what it is."

The others agreed that this suggestion was sound.

"Another point relates to what kind of a creature it is that you have been dealing with. When you fired at it and struck it the other night, Fred, your bullet glanced off with a sound as if it had struck some metallic substance. When you had your feet on it to-night, what did it feel like?"

"That would be hard to say, as I don't remember that I ever felt anything like it before, and I was sorter off my balance. It felt, perhaps, like an alligator's back; perhaps like a steamboat boiler."

"Just so. It wasn't soft and slippery, like a catfish; was it?"

"Not a bit."

"Well, for my part I have nearly made up my mind what sort of a thing it is."

"I think so, too," drawled Harvey Storms.

"What is it that you think?" asked Bradley.

"I think just as he thinks," replied Storms nodding his head at Marsh.

"How do you know what he thinks?"

"Oh, I can guess."

Bradley then applied to Mat Marsh for a statement of his real opinion.

"I can only say that it is no kind of a fish," replied Marsh.

"No kind of a fish," echoed Storms.

"And I have sent to St. Louis," said Marsh.

"for something that I think will enable us to settle the question before long."

As nothing more satisfactory could be got out of those two knowing ones, the entire party sought their bunks, Aaron Hicksey being easily persuaded to remain on board the "Experiment" until morning.

In spite of the exciting events of the earlier part of the night, and in spite of the strangeness of their situation, all slept well and soundly.

But all were awakened at the same moment, during the small hours of the night, by a heavy blow that shook the boat, followed by the crash of breaking and splitting timbers.

They tumbled out of their berths, or were shaken out, and some of them hastily began to dress themselves; but a regard for the safety of their precious persons soon compelled them to abandon that intention.

The blow had knocked the contents of the ark, as Fred Light expressed it, "all of a heap," overthrowing the stove, scattering iron utensils about, smashing crockery, emptying a portion of the shelves, extinguishing the light, and upsetting things generally.

At the same time the water began to pour into the craft through a large and ragged hole in her side, and it was as much as the traders could do to find their way out at the door, and to climb up on the bank, before the river took entire possession of the "Experiment."

As the ark had no heavy loading, it could not have sunk out of sight, even if it had not been securely made fast to the shore; but the outer side settled down in the water until the "Experiment" made a very sorry show. Although not a total wreck, it was doubtful whether it would be worth while to raise and repair her.

Quite as sorry a sight were the recent occupants of the flatboat, who had collected on the river bank, with scarcely any clothes to cover them, and with no means of making a fire or starting a light. Fortunately the night was warm, and the mosquitoes were not very plentiful.

"Was it a stroke of lightning, or an earthquake?" asked Billy Bradley.

"Dot vas nottings but aer tyfel," remarked Herman.

"It was the confounded crittur that Aaron and I got after," said Fred Light. "After the damage was done, I heard the same queer noise that we heard the other night, when we first saw it."

"I heard it, too," said Aaron. "Just such a noise as it made, Fred, when we followed it into the bayou."

"That was the thing," said Marsh. "It went for us with a purpose, and stove a hole in the flatboat with the intention of sinking her. Whatever it may be, I am convinced that it has human brains to back it."

"Human brains to back it!" echoed Storms.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Bradley, as he slapped at an occasional mosquito.

It was agreed that they could do nothing until daylight; but they had not long to wait, as

day soon broke, and then they set at work to recover from the wrecked boat such articles as they absolutely needed.

By wading and rummaging they succeeded in fishing out their clothes, baggage and rifles, all more or less damaged by the water, and were fortunate in securing a quantity of ammunition that had not been injured.

"We have been bit pretty hard," said Marsh. "As it may be our turn to strike the second blow, we are lucky in having tools to work with."

The question then arose of the future movements of the traders and their friends, and it was speedily settled by Aaron Hicksey, who cordially invited them to visit his plantation and make his house their home.

"There is lots of room," he said, "and plenty to eat and drink, and I will be right glad to have you there, and to have you stay as long as you will."

This offer was accepted as freely as it was made, and Aaron promised that he would send some men to the river with a team, to recover and bring ashore everything that could be saved from the wreck of the "Experiment."

The skiff was hauled ashore and concealed in a clump of bushes, and the party, with such of their baggage as they could carry, took up the line of march for Aaron Hicksey's plantation.

CHAPTER VII.

PLOTTING AGAINST THE TRADERS.

At an early hour in the morning Madison Searle was in his bed-room; but he was not asleep, nor was he in bed.

He had passed a restless night. After vain endeavors to sleep, resulting only in fitful dozes from which he awoke with a start and a snort, he had finally risen, nervously lighted a lamp, and partially dressed himself.

There was a bottle of brandy on the table, with glasses, sugar, and sprigs of mint, and to the mixing and absorbing of these articles he applied himself, in the intervals of his unquiet walking, occasionally stopping to rest in a chair.

The windows were wide open, except for the mosquito guards; but the night was close, and liquor and impatience made the old man hot and uncomfortable.

There was a knock at the door, and the man known as Tyson entered.

"I heard you stirrin' about, Cap," he said, "and I looked in to ask if there is anythin' the matter."

"I couldn't sleep," replied Searle. "I was worried and restless. Have a drink this mornin', Tyson?"

"Thank ye. Don't care if I do."

While the old man was pressing the liquor on his visitor, he did not forget to mix a fresh portion for himself and send it down his throat.

"I suppose Harry has not got in," he said, as he set down his glass.

"Not yet," replied Tyson.

"I hope he has settled them."

"Oh, you can bet on that. He never misses."

In a few minutes the jingle of a bell was heard.

"There he is," said the old man. "Run down and meet him, Tyson, and bring him up here as soon as you can."

Tyson hastily left the room, but soon returned with a tall young man, dark of complexion, with black hair and eyes, and with a broad, square brow. In spite of his rather ungainly figure, this young man would have been passably good-looking, had it not been for a purple blotch that covered the greater part of the left side of his face, completely spoiling his appearance.

Madison Searle cordially greeted the newcomer, and what passed for a smile spread over his rosy countenance.

"I am tremendously glad to see you, Harry," he said. "Will you take mint and sugar in yours?"

"I don't mind if I do, as I feel a little shady this morning. Have you been sitting up all night with the bottle, old gent?"

"I have been wakeful, my son, and have been up off and on; but I am as near right as I ever am. If there should be an end of the bottle, there would be an end of me—that's all."

Madison Searle joined his son in a dram, as he had joined Tyson, and there was an expectant look on his face when he finished his glass.

"Well, Harry," he said, somewhat impatiently, "have you succeeded, or not?"

"Of course I have succeeded. Did you ever know me to fail? My calculations are all made with scientific accuracy, and they never miss."

"You have wiped out that concern, then?"

"I should say so. There is a hole knocked in that mud-turtle which it would puzzle the carpenters to repair, and she must be in the Mississippi now, considerably more than out of it."

"But the people—what has become of them?"

"Of course I can't know anything about them for certain; but it is likely enough that they were drowned. If any of them escaped, their trading business is sure to be broken up, and they can't be expected to hang around these parts much longer."

"Good boy, Harry. You are the smartest one of the crowd. There's nothing like science, after all."

Several hours after this interview Madison Searle was seated at dinner, with his son and Tyson. To speak more accurately, they had finished their dinner, and were sampling some of the wines and liquors with which the cellar of the mansion was well supplied.

Without warning, Eva Summers rushed into the room, flushed and excited.

"What do you want now, Miss Impudence?" asked Madison Searle, rather angrily.

"Oh, guardy, I have just heard the worst kind of news. It takes the rag off the bush, for bad."

"What is it, little one?"

"You know the nice people I spoke to you about, who have a trading-boat on the river, up around the bend?"

"I believe you did say something to me about some trash of that sort," replied the old man, who did not like to have that subject brought up, and yet was curious to know what the girl had heard.

"They ain't trash at all, guardy—not by a jug-full—but a decent, square crowd. They haven't got a trading-boat any more. She is smashed."

"Indeed?"

"Yes—gone under. A log, or something of the kind, came spinning down the river last night, and waltzed right into their boat, and stove a hole in it as big as a hoopskirt, and it—well, guardy, to cut the story short, the concern kerflummixed."

"The people were drowned, I suppose," suggested Madison Searles.

"Why, seems to me you speak as if you wish they were drowned. No; they were too smart for that. They got ashore all safe and sound, and now they are staying at Aaron Hicksey's place. But the boat is a dead duck, and all their nice dry goods and things are soaked with water and everlastingly ruined."

"I suppose they had swindled the people out of more than their loss would amount to?"

"Swindled the people!" exclaimed Eva. "I don't believe a word of it. That ain't their style. But it was a rough deal for them, guardy—now, wasn't it?—and it seems to me, more than ever, that you ought to ask them here to dinner, and that we ought to try, among us, to do something for them."

"Very well, child. I will think about it. Run away, now, and don't bother us. We are busy."

Eva opened the door, but turned and gave a suspicious glance at the table before she went out.

"I want you to think about it right soon, guardy," she said. "And don't forget to ask Aaron, too."

With this she vanished, leaving the two young men staring at the old one.

"That beats my time," said Tyson. "For a chicken, she is the coolest head I ever met."

"Are you going to give in to her, father?" asked Harry Searles.

"Of course I am not," impatiently replied the old man. "But what can I do? I don't want to be cross with her, or pull her down all at once. So those sneaking cusses are safe and sound, in spite of science, and have settled at Hicksey's, and I don't believe they have the least idea of getting away from these parts. There is just one thing about it—they must be cleaned out."

The old man enforced this opinion by striking the table with his hand, and washed it down with a rousing glass of brandy.

"What is the matter with them?" Harry asked.

"Matter enough. They are spies, and perhaps they are State officers in disguise. Was a trading-boat ever known to land here before? No. Is there any business about here to justify a trading-boat in coming here and staying? Of course there isn't. Are those scamps anything like the traders we know of? Not a bit. If I am rightly informed, any man can tell at a glance that they are new to the business. Who are they, then, and what are they here for? They are spies, or worse, and have come here to search us out and break us up. It is to the in-

terest of every one of us that they shall be put out of the way."

The others assented to the conclusion of this oration, and Harry Searle wanted to know what his father proposed to do about it.

"We didn't succeed in cleaning them out on water, though we struck them a hard blow," replied the old man. "Now that they are on shore we will have a better chance at them. That Hicksey place needs a lesson too, and there are good pickings there. I mean to turn the Bingley boys loose on them."

Tyson suggested that the Bingley gang had tried that game once, and the strangers had been too much for them.

"The Bingley boys must have help," replied the old man—"all the help they need."

"When is this raid to come off?" asked Harry.

"One of these nights. I can't say just when. Come, let us see if Mart Bingley is anywhere about the place."

As the three men went out at one door Eva Summers thrust her head in at the other door.

"You mean old thing!" she exclaimed, as soon as they were out of her sight. "So that is the job you have put up on me? It is lucky that I tumbled to your racket, and kept my ear at the crack. You mean to clean out those nice folks, and raise a rumpus at Aaron Hicksey's house. Well, you won't win at that game, if I am the girl I take myself to be. I will send word to Aaron, so that he can be ready to put a spider in your dumpling."

She hastily left the house by the back way, but stopped when she reached the shrubbery.

"What shall I do?" she said, musingly. "I mustn't go too fast. They won't let me leave the place any more, and I wouldn't bet a cent on Jeff, though he does talk as soft as mush. How can I send word to Aaron, anyhow? Ah! there's his dog. Here, Carlo! Carlo!"

A handsome pointer came running to her, and plainly expressed his joy at meeting her. It was Aaron Hicksey's dog, and he was so fond of her that he often came without leave to visit her.

"Good Carlo!" she said, as she patted him.

Come, Carlo!" and the dog gladly followed her up-stairs to her own room.

There she speedily wrote a brief note, which she folded carefully, sewed it in a little bag, and securely fastened it to Carlo's neck. Then she went down-stairs with the dog, and took him beyond the shrubbery.

"Go home, Carlo!" she commanded. "Go home, sir, I say!" with an angry stamp of her foot.

The dog understood what he was expected to do. He leaped a high fence, and pointed his nose toward home.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN UNDERGROUND PASSAGE.

THE wrecked crew of the "Experiment," and their guests agreed that the change from the flatboat to Aaron Hicksey's house was a pleasant one, and that their situation furnished no cause for grumbling.

It was strange, when Fred Light reflected upon it, what a hold Mat Marsh had gained on the party. His superior education, his evi-

dent experience in many of the affairs of life, his undoubted acquaintance with the purposes of the Charles Searcy who had fitted out the party, and the faculty of leadership which he possessed in an unusual degree, had brought him to the front. Although but a hired hand, he was looked upon as the chief of the party, and his advice was respected, and his opinions were deferred to, accordingly.

He said that although something in money value had been lost by the sinking of the "Experiment," they had improved their position, and were probably better situated for the prosecution of the ends at which they were supposed to aim, than they would have been if they had stuck to the flatboat.

Fred Light, who was not at all worried by the loss of the boat and her stock, was quite of the same opinion, and Herman Schweitopfel was always pleased with what suited his young friend.

Aaron Hicksey's house was large and commodious; the provisions were plentiful, the cooking was good, and "the niggers," as he called the colored people who "ran" his plantation, seemed to be really fond of him, and were very attentive to his guests.

As soon as they were settled, Aaron sent some of his people to the river with two teams, accompanied by Mat Marsh and Herman, to recover from the wreck of the "Experiment" whatever was worth saving.

Fred Light did not accompany them, as he had another object in view, in which Aaron Hicksey was also interested.

Aaron had suggested that there must be a building of some kind at the place where the marine monster seemed to have taken up its quarters, and that the building must be near Madison Searle's house. Fred Light had then said that they must get into that place, in spite of everybody.

They had mutually agreed to scout around and over the Searcy plantation, and to go as far as they could go without being discovered.

This was the object which they had in view, and which they explained to the others.

Billy Bradley, who had the dash and enterprise of an ambitious reporter, desired to accompany them, but Fred declined this proposition as politely as he could.

"We would be right glad to have you go with us, Mr. Bradley," he said, "but you would be just one too many. Two are company, but three would be a crowd."

Directly after dinner they set out on this expedition.

"If we should happen to get shot," suggested Fred, "it would be a good thing not to die hungry."

Aaron smiled at this grim jest, and took the lead, as he was thoroughly acquainted with the neighborhood, and more especially so with the routes that led toward Eva Summers's home.

As long as they were on Aaron Hicksey's land the fields looked clean and neat, and the cotton and other crops appeared to be in good condition; but they easily knew when they had crossed into the old Searcy plantation, which adjoined his ground.

There the evidences of neglect were sadly

visible in rich fields that were overgrown by bushes and brambles. Only small portions of that plantation were in cultivation, and those had been leased to "croppers," and carelessly tended.

Soon they found themselves in a tangle of trees and undergrowth.

"There is a path here that leads to the house," said Aaron, "but somebody might happen to come along, and we don't care to be seen. So we may as well keep to the brush."

"All right," answered Fred. "The brush is the place for me."

As they pushed on into the thicket, making their way slowly through the vines and bushes, Aaron, who was in the advance, suddenly disappeared.

As he did not reappear, Fred called him, but got no answer. He went a little further on, and called again.

This time he got an answer, which seemed to come from the earth beneath him:

"Be careful where you step, Fred. I have tumbled into a deep hole here."

Fred looked about him carefully, and soon discovered that he was standing near the edge of the hole into which his friend had fallen, and which was completely concealed by tangled vines and other undergrowth. He looked over, and asked Aaron if he was hurt.

"Not a bit," was the reply. "There were some rotten planks over this hole, and they gave way when I stepped on them; but the fall was soft enough. I say, Fred, I wish you would come down here. There's something queer in this place."

"Something queer" had a strong attraction for Fred, who picked up a vine and swung himself down into the opening, alighting at the side of his friend, who was rather dirty, but not otherwise damaged.

"What is queer, Aaron?" he asked.

"This hole. I would like to know where it leads to."

"Leads to? What do you mean?"

"Wait a bit, until your eyes get used to the darkness, and then you will see what I mean."

Fred was able to perceive, after a few minutes, that the hole in the ground was merely the entrance to another hole, which led out from it horizontally in the direction in which they had been traveling—that is to say, toward the old Searcy mansion, which he had seen through the trees before he descended into the hole.

This underground passage was not merely a hole in the ground, but was a complete tunnel, being arched with brick, and high enough to allow a man to walk in a stooping posture.

"Your head is level, Aaron," said Fred. "What does that thing mean, and where does it lead to?"

"When you ask me what it means, I give it up," replied Aaron. "But I judge that it leads direct to the house, and it would be worth while to follow it up."

"That's so; but the hole is so confoundedly dark."

Aaron had in his pockets a cigar fuse and some wax matches, and it was thought that

with these sufficient light might be secured to enable them to make the search.

They started in, occasionally lighting one of the matches, but generally groping their way through the darkness. The tunnel was straight, there was no obstruction in the way, and their own voices and the occasional scamper of a rat were the only sounds that disturbed the silence.

They soon reached a place where the tunnel seemed to come to an end. Lighting a match, they saw that it was partially choked up by rubbish.

Clearing away enough of this to enable them to get through, they found themselves in a small underground apartment, from which a narrow flight of crooked stairs led upward.

"We must be under the house now," remarked Aaron.

"Do you suppose that the people who are living here now know anything about the hole we have come through?" asked Fred.

"I am pretty sure they don't. The place where I fell in was covered and hid, and you saw that this end of the hole was stopped up, as if it hadn't been used for ever so long."

"Then we can sneak about here as we please, and they will be none the wiser for it. Now we must see where these steps lead to."

Aaron lighted his fuse, and the two young men began to ascend the narrow steps. These were slimy and damp, rickety and rotten, threatening in places to fall from under their feet; but they moved cautiously, and made their way upward as quietly as they could.

They passed up what would amount to two flights of stairs, winding through a sort of box, and ending at a narrow landing.

At this point there seemed to be a door in the box, and Fred Light placed his ear against it, and listened for several minutes, but heard nothing.

"We have got to see the end of this thing," he said. "There don't seem to be any knob to this door, if it is a door, but there must be some way of getting through."

He fumbled about the supposed door, but did not succeed in inducing it to yield.

Aaron blew his fuse into a flame, and they found a bolt, which flew aside after they had fingered it for a while, and the door opened from them.

They looked through the opening and saw a narrow, high-ceilinged room, which was evidently used but seldom. It was uncarpeted, and the only furniture was a desk, a table, a few chairs, and a number of empty book-shelves. At the right were two tall windows, covered with dust, and with the blinds closed.

"This used to be the library when the Searcys lived here," said Aaron. "I know it, for I remember being in there when I was a little chap; but it didn't look a bit then as it looks now."

Fred Light stepped softly into the room, raised one of the windows, and looked out through the blind. The view covered a carelessly-kept garden, a quantity of tangled shrubbery, and a neglected lawn, at the foot of which

nearly surrounded by trees, was a windowless brick-building, beyond which could be seen the water of the Mississippi.

Fred Light called his companions, who hastened to his side, and together they looked out.

On the lawn, near the closed brick building, were an old man and two young men, who were talking together, but nothing of what they said could be heard at the distance of the library window.

"I think that is what we are looking for," said Fred. "That brick building must be at the head of the piece of water up which we rowed after that confounded crittur."

Aaron was of the same opinion.

"I see Mart Bingley down there talking with two other men," continued Fred. "I have good cause to know him. Do you know the others?"

Aaron replied that the elderly man was Madison Searle, and one of the young men was his son, Harry Searle. Fred took a good look at them.

"I will know them if I ever see them again," he said. "Now, Aaron, I think we have done all we can do to-day. The sun will soon go down, and we must get back to your house, or our friends will be uneasy about us. We have made a big thing out of our scout, and we ought to be satisfied. We know that we can get inside of this house whenever we want to, and that may be worth a heap to us."

"That's so, Fred. I could come here and see Eva as often as I want to if she really cared to have me come."

"That is for you to find out, my boy. The way is clear, anyhow. Come along now, Aaron. We will have to tackle that brick building some dark night, and we had better be well fixed for the job, as the chances are that we will find that strange crittur inside of it."

Before they left the room the young fellows examined the door by which they had entered. It was faced with a high mirror, which completely covered the opening. Hid among the ornaments at the left of the mirror, they found a small knob or button, by which the spring that held the bolt was released.

Satisfied that they knew how to get out as well as to get in, they closed the door behind them, retraced their steps down the stairs and through the tunnel, and hastened home.

It was nearly dark when they reached Aaron Hicksey's house, and the first to meet and greet them was Aaron's pointer.

"Be quiet, old fellow," said Aaron, as he bent down and caressed the dog. "Why, what's this, Carlo? What have you got on your neck?"

With his knife he cut from the dog's neck a small package, covered with silk, and held it up.

"Here is something else that is queer," he said. "I wonder what it means? Let us take it into the light and examine it."

CHAPTER IX.

EVA'S WARNING.

FRED and Aaron were gladly greeted by their friends in the house. It was already under-

stood among them that Fred never went anywhere without making some surprising discovery, or meeting with some exciting adventure, and they pressed him for an account of what he had seen and done.

He related their adventures in the discovery and search of the underground passage. While he was thus engaged, Aaron Hicksey opened the packet that he had taken from the dog, and found in it a note, which he read.

"What is it, Aaron?" asked Fred. "Anything the matter?"

"I will tell you when you get through," replied Aaron. "Go on with your story."

Fred's account of the discovery of the tunnel, and of its connection with the old Searcy mansion, were highly interesting to all, but particularly so to Mat Marsh, who was visibly excited by the description.

"I can't guess what that hole was ever made for," he said: "but it is easy to see that it will be very useful to us, if we want to get inside of that house."

"I don't really know why we should want to get in there," remarked Fred; "but it does give us a big chance."

"It would be a splendid thing for me, if I thought that Eva Summers cared for me," said Aaron, with a sigh. "That brings us to the note that my dog brought home on his neck. It is from her."

"Is it private?" asked Fred.

"Not a bit. It is a business note, and concerns all of us. Listen, now."

He read these words to his companions:

"DEAR AARON:—There is going to be a raid and a rumpus at your place before long, by the Bingley boys and some others. I don't know when it is to be, but it will come off at night. I only got this much by chance, and send it to you, so that you can keep your eyes peeled for them, and put a spider in their dumpling. Yours, in hope of nicer times,
"EVA."

"That is plain enough as far as it goes," said Mat Marsh. "She don't say how she got her news; but she must have heard it at the house, and probably it came from Madison Searle himself. We can judge, then, who it was that sent the Bingley gang to clean us out when we landed. We can judge, too, whose were the human brains behind the contrivance that wrecked our boat."

"Aaron and I saw Madison Searle and his son talking to Mart Bingley this afternoon," said Fred Light. "So I reckon that we may set it down as a fact that he is behind this business. But why should he be so hot against us? We haven't done him any harm."

"It is not what we have done, Fred, but what he is afraid we may do, that worries him. If he is a man who has done something wrong in the past, or who is doing something wrong now—and either supposition is likely enough to be true—he naturally don't want to be found out. Therefore he is suspicious of strangers, and I believe that he thinks he has good reason to be suspicious of us."

"Why so?" asked Fred.

"Because anybody could see with half an eye that we were not what we pretended to be—that we were only amateur traders. Do you

remember a daisy who came down to the boat the second day, who brought a lot of coon-skins and chickens and eggs and lint-cotton, which he wanted to trade with us for goods?"

"Yes, I remember him well enough, and I remember that not one of us was up to the notch of that sort of trading."

"Just so. We were not equal to the emergency, and he saw through us easily enough. Well, I inquired about that man, and learned that he was from Madison Searle's place, and then I could guess his object. It is plain enough now, I think, in the light of recent events. Madison Searle wants to get us out of his way."

"So that the devil-fish can have full play," suggested Fred. "What kind of a critter do you take that to be, anyhow?"

"I believe that we will know what it is, before we get through with this business," replied Marsh. "I am convinced that it is no fish."

"It is no fish," echoed Harvey storms.

"We had better quit talking and go to work," observed Aaron. "Those raiders may come to see us to-night, and how shall we prepare to meet them?"

This question was easier to ask than to answer, as it was clear that Aaron Hicksey's house was a difficult position to defend. It was a large and irregular frame building, a part of it being two stories in height, and a part but one story. The one-storied portions were mostly small wings and additions that had grown up about the main building, offering to an enemy a large extent of surface from which to select a point of attack, and the defense of the entire building would require a considerable force.

"We might call on the niggers," suggested Aaron.

"Some of them have arms, and I don't doubt that they would be willing to help me. But this is none of their fight."

"That's a fact, Aaron," said Fred. "There are six of us, all well armed, and if we can't beat off any crowd they are likely to send, we deserve to be cleaned out."

It was agreed that their numbers were sufficient, but the position needed improving. It was clear that their expected assailants would not only have the advantage of choosing the point of attack, but would have a further advantage at night that might prove fatal to those inside of the house. The latter would necessarily require more or less light, which would render them easy marks when they took their positions to fire from the windows; while the outsiders, sheltered by the trees and shrubbery and the darkness, would be comparatively invisible.

Various plans for overcoming these advantages were brought forward; but none of them struck the sense of the majority as being altogether feasible.

Billy Bradley suggested that they should vacate the house on the approach of the raiders, allow them to enter, and so gain for themselves the advantage which the enemy would otherwise have; but this plan would leave Aaron Hicksey's property at the mercy of the Bingley gang.

Aaron proposed that they should prepare an ambush and attack their assailants on the way to the house; but to this it was objected that

it was not known what route they would take, or when they would come.

Fred Light was for carrying the war into Africa, and anticipating their foes by an attack on Madison Searle's place; but this proposition was set aside as rash and unjustifiable.

At this time of doubt and perplexity Herman Schweitopfel came forward as the Napoleon of the occasion.

"I dells you vot ve sall do," said the sturdy Teuton. "I was been a solcher in dot var mit dose Vrenchmens. Some ofen us Uhlans vas by a varm-house, ven dose Vrench solchers come to cotch us. Dot vas night times, and ve knew dey vas comin'. So ve fixes tings, oond ve shoots dem down so easy like *nefer* vas, oond dey comes not near dot house."

"Give us the racket, old boy," said Fred. "How did you do the trick?"

"Vas you got any sltrow!" asked Herman, turning to Aaron Hicksey.

"Plenty of straw," replied Aaron.

"Any tar, or any coal-oil?"

"Plenty of tar, and plenty of coal-oil."

"Den ve fixes 'em, pooty quick."

Under the directions of Herman four stakes were sharpened, and were driven into the ground at the distance of some fifty feet from the house, on each of the four sides of the building—though it was so irregular in form that it might in fact have been called many sided.

Around each of these stakes a layer of straw was tied, and saturated with coal oil. Other similar layers were added, until the bundles were nearly as big as beehives, and over the whole a quantity of melted tar was poured.

Then a fuse of lint cotton, loosely rolled, and well filled with gunpowder, was laid from each of these structures to the house, and Herman grunted his approval of the entire arrangement.

"Now let does peoples come," he said, "oond pooty quick ve sees dem so vell like dey sees us, oond mebbe some besser as dot."

"We will have some jolly bonfires, anyhow," remarked Fred Light.

CHAPTER X.

THE FIGHT AT THE HICKSEY PLACE.

THOUGH all had assisted in carrying out Herman's idea, and had worked with a will, the construction of the light-houses, as Fred called them, had taken considerable time, and it was more than an hour after midnight when the preparations were completed.

The lamps that had been lighted were turned down low, and the occupants of the house—the servants having long since retired to their cabins outside—repaired to the stations which they had agreed to take. Mat Marsh and Herman guarded the front entrance, Fred Light and Aaron Hicksey took care of the rear, and Harvey Storms and Billy Bradley watched at the east and west sides.

Each detachment was protected by mattresses or feather-beds piled at the doors and windows, and all the interior doors were wide open, so that they could hear each other's voices, and could easily bring their whole force to any point upon which there should be a general attack.

"This is better than a play," said Billy Bradley "and the sensational report that I can make of it will be well worth a month's salary."

"It is vastly better than loafing around St. Louis and playing billiards," drawled Harvey Storms, as he sighted over his rifle-barrel at some imaginary object in the darkness."

"I am glad that they are going to attack us," said Marsh, "because that will give us a good excuse for any move we care to make against them. But I hope that our friend Hicksey's property will suffer no damage."

"Don't worry about that," shouted Aaron from the rear. "Some of them have a grudge against me, anyhow, and they are bound to take it out sooner or later."

"If they're coming, why don't they come along?" impatiently asked Fred Light.

If the raiders had timed their operations with the purpose of allowing their adversaries to complete their preparations for defense, they could not have favored them more than they did.

Hardly had Fred asked his impatient question, when a warning whistle from Mat Marsh sounded through the house.

"Be quiet!" he said. "They are coming!"

His quick eyes had caught sight of some dark figures down the broad graveled walk, which immediately disappeared in the shrubbery at each side.

Shortly afterward he saw them slinking about among the trees near the house, and one of them came out and advanced in the direction of the front door.

"Who goes there?" and his clear and commanding tones fairly startled his friends inside.

There was no answer to this challenge, and the man continued to advance slowly.

"Keep away from here," ordered Marsh, "or you will get hurt!"

The man suddenly sunk to the ground, and for a minute or so nothing could be seen or heard from the house.

Then came the sharp reports of three guns, with three bright flashes in the darkness of the foliage, and bullets and buckshot struck about the front door, but without harming the two guards, who were crouched behind a sofa and a mattress.

"Light up, Herman!" whispered Marsh.

The Teuton scratched a match on the sole of his boot, and touched it to his fuse.

A line of fire ran fizzing and sparkling down the steps of the veranda and across the green-sward. Then a pile of powder under the straw flashed up, and the next instant the mass of combustibles burst into a bright blaze.

This sudden light was so vivid that a large area in front of the house was illuminated, and the forms of the trees and shrubs were brought out with startling distinctness.

Its effect upon the raiders was to surprise them so that they scarcely knew what they were about; but they quickly perceived the necessity of getting into the shadow, and hastened to cover behind the trees and bushes.

As the man on the ground began to crawl away, Marsh's rifle cracked, and the fellow jumped up with a howl, and limped to the trees.

"Vy you not kills him?" growled Herman, who had picked up his rifle, and was watching for a chance to take aim.

"I think it would be better to scare them off if we can," replied Marsh. "Look out, Mr. Bradley! They are going around your way."

He had seen the dark forms skulking across the graveled walk and toward the west, and he hastened to reinforce the reporter.

Billy Bradley was wide awake, and, before the baffled raiders could make a rush at his position, his bonfire was lighted, and the sharp crack of a rifle told them that they had better keep away from that locality.

"It is your turn now, Fred!" shouted Marsh, as he saw them scurry away from the light that shone upon them so suddenly.

Fred and Aaron waited and watched, peering into the darkness to get sight of their foes; but they neither saw nor heard anything.

An oppressive silence ensued, which was broken by two quick reports at Harvey Storms's side.

Marsh, who seemed to be everywhere at once, hastened to the St. Louis man.

"You needn't mind," drawled Storms, as he applied a lighted match to his fuse. "I can take care of them here, and I think that one of them has got a pill from my pistol."

His bonfire burst into a blaze, but no men could be seen near it, living or dead.

"That is strange," he muttered. "I could have sworn that I hit one of them."

Marsh returned to his own position, and another period of silence ensued. The three fires that had been lighted were burning brightly, and seemed likely to last for some time; but no person could be seen near them, and beyond their range was the deepest gloom.

"I wonder what has become of them now," said Marsh.

"Dot light vas vot gets um," replied Herman. "Dey vos all runned away already, oond dot's a pity. Ve shoots not a plendy."

"I hardly believe they can have been frightened off so easily," said Marsh.

"Here they are!" shouted Aaron, who was all excitement at discovering some of the enemy in the rear.

"Light up, Aaron, and don't raise such a row," remarked Fred as he handled his rifle.

Aaron lighted his fuse. The line of fire ran out into the grass briskly enough, but suddenly stopped, sputtered and expired.

"Some confounded cat or dog has run across it and broken it," said Aaron. "I will sneak out and give it a start."

"Don't you do it!" said Fred. "They may snap you up, and it ain't worth while to run such a risk."

But Aaron, on the impulse of the moment, jumped over the barricade of feather-beds and quilts, and crouched down in the darkness.

In another moment a faint light was seen as he struck a match, at a distance of some ten steps from the house.

Then came a rush from the bushes, followed by blows and oaths, and several dark forms were visible, huddled together on the grass.

With a sharp cry Fred Light sprang over the

breastwork and ran to the assistance of his friend.

He found Aaron down on his back, and two men were dragging him away, while a third was looking for a chance to take hold.

The third man was instantly knocked down by one of Fred Light's scientific left-handers, and another he saluted with a vigorous kick that doubled him up. The remaining man loosed his hold of Aaron, and at the same moment there was a pistol report, and Fred felt a sharp twinge in his left arm near the shoulder.

With his right hand he struck the man before him savagely in the face, anger and pain aiding him to put all his force into the blow.

The next minute the two youths were safe and breathless behind their barricade.

Mat Marsh had hastened to the rear position; but he had hardly seen what was taking place there when his attention was attracted to the west by the reports of firearms, the crashing of glass, and the sound of voices and trampling of feet inside of the house.

Billy Bradley was stationed at a window at the west end of the building, and a number of the assailants, crawling around the wing, had come upon him unawares. When Marsh saw them they were pouring into the broad hall, which was nearly as large as an ordinary room.

"All here!" he shouted, as he fired into the thick of the gang. Then he clubbed his rifle and charged upon them.

Herman Schweitopfel hurried in from the front door, and Harvey Storms's long strides brought him quickly from the east end, but Fred and Aaron had a contract on their hands that did not permit them to join their friends.

Hardly had they retreated behind their breastwork, when a charge was made upon them, which brought their pistols into play.

For a few seconds the reports of the firearms were sharp and rapid; but the youths, owing to the security of their position, were the victors in the brief struggle, and soon they had, as far as they could see, a clear field before them.

Then they hastened to the relief of their friends, but stopped and stared in amazement at the sight that met their eyes.

Marsh and Herman were powerful men, and either of them was fairly a match in a hand-to-hand struggle for any two of their antagonists. Few shots were fired, even with pistols, as the contest was too quick and close for the effective use of weapons, and Marsh and Herman had pressed the raiders with such hard and telling blows that they huddled together and hampered each other.

But the most wonderful figure in this struggle was Harvey Storms.

When Fred and Aaron appeared on the scene he had picked up one of the intruders, and the next instant he threw him bodily out of the open door. Another quickly met the same fate, and then the St. Louis man dashed into the huddle, felling them on the right and the left.

Before Fred and Aaron could see a chance to get their work in, the fighting was finished, and Storms was amusing himself with flinging

out of the door such of the assailants as had not been able to get away.

"That beats my time," was all Fred Light could say, as he stepped up to Storms and felt his muscles.

"I wouldn't have missed this bit of fun for a fifty-dollar bill," drawled the athlete.

Aaron Hicksey ran outside to set fire to Billy Bradley's beacon, which had been extinguished by the raiders, and to his own, which had not been lighted. The others were still burning brightly, illuminating a large area around the house; but no person was visible outside.

When he returned, his friends were grouped around the reporter, who had been found lying near the window where the raiders had effected an entrance. He was badly wounded in one of his legs and in his left side, but had not called attention to his condition until the fight was over.

His clothes were stripped off, and Mat Marsh hastened to bandage his wounds so as to stop the flow of blood.

"Why didn't you call to us sooner?" asked Marsh.

"I did not want to bother you and spoil the fun," he feebly replied.

Fred Light, when the excitement was over, found a flesh wound in his arm, by which he had lost considerable blood, and it needed to be bound up. The others, with the exception of Harvey Storms, could show various cuts and contusions; but none of them were seriously injured.

While Marsh and Fred were doing what they could to make the reporter comfortable, the rest sallied out to inspect the grounds.

They found no living enemies, but near the west end of the building they discovered a dead man.

"I knew that I had hit one of those fellows," said Storms, "and now I am glad that I settled him."

At the rear of the house they found another body, which was recognized as that of Mart Bingley. Those of the raiders who had merely been wounded had doubtless been assisted by their companions to leave the premises.

The negroes on the plantation had been aroused by the firing and the bonfires, and had approached the scene of excitement; but it was not until it was clear that the danger was at an end that one of them ventured to come to the house and ask what was the matter.

"We have had a bit of a skrimmage," replied Aaron, "and one of us is badly hurt. Get on the best horse right away, Sam, and hurry after Dr. Wilkins. Then you may ride on to Squire Norvell's, and tell him that there is a case here for a coroner."

CHAPTER XL.

MADISON SEARLE'S STORY.

MADISON SEARLE had taken a strange fancy to the room in the old Searcy mansion that had in former times been the library.

He had caused it to be cleaned and carpeted, and had added to its furniture a sideboard, a lounge, and an easy-chair. The sideboard held the stimulants which he considered necessary to

his existence, and the lounge and easy-chair were necessary for his convenience and comfort.

As he was seated in his easy-chair with his bottle and glass at his side, not forgetting his mint and sugar, Eva Summers entered without knocking.

At once she began to upbraid him.

"You are a sweet crowd, you are, if a feller don't believe what he says," was her uncomplimentary remark.

"What's the matter with you now, little one?" asked the old man. "Has your temper got the best of you again? Better take a little something to soften it."

He poured some of that liquid from the bottle into the glass.

"I wouldn't touch the stuff with a forty-foot pole," she said. "You know well enough what's the matter. You promised to invite Aaron Hicksey here to dinner, with those nice folks who are stopping at his house, so that I might have a little company outside of your gang of scalawags, and you haven't done it."

"Couldn't do it, Eva. They had got into some sort of trouble, and I had to wait until it got settled down, you see. You mustn't be in such a hurry."

"How did they get into trouble?" she angrily demanded. "Who sent the Bingley boys and the rest of that crowd to raise a rumpus with them? Were any of your friends in the party? You are a sly old seed, guardy, but I can see through your little game. When are you going to do what I told you to do?"

"You must wait a while, Eva."

"Oh, yes, I'll wait—until I get ready to turn myself loose. I ain't all made up of patience, not by an ounce or two. I don't keep my eyes and ears open for nothing, and there's more than one way to get news out of this house."

"Thunderation!" exclaimed the old man. "You musn't talk like that, child. You might make me angry, and I am furious when I am riled."

"I ain't to be sneezed at, either; mind that. I say, guardy, I want to know who I am, and where I came from, and what I am here for."

Madison Searle's purple face turned darker, and he looked as if he was about to choke. But he revived himself with the liquor he had poured out for Eva.

"Don't shoot off your tongue in the air, little one," he said. "I am afraid your head is getting out of shape."

"My head is level as a board," she replied. "and you can bet all your money on that. I haven't said all I have got to say; but I reckon this is enough for one dose."

She left the room as hastily as she had entered it, nearly running against Harry Searle, who was coming in as she went out.

"What's the matter with that little vixen?" asked the young man.

"Just one of her tantrums," replied his father. "She is wrathful about that fuss at the Hicksey place, and wants to lay the blame on me. She threatened to blow on us again."

"If I thought she would do it, father, I would lock her up tight, or do something that would stop her mouth."

"Oh, it is only talk, Harry. She is always talking, but don't mean what she says."

"But that Hicksey business, old man, is no joking matter," said Harry, as he helped himself to a chair. "Two of our best men are dead, another is badly hurt, and I hear that the people of the country are talking of making a fuss about that night's work."

"Let them talk, Harry. They can't hurt you and me. We have been careful to keep our fingers out of the fire."

"But that is not all, sir. Our men want to know how the thing leaked out. Those folks at Hicksey's were all ready to receive us, and they must have known that we were coming. Who is the traitor in the camp?"

"That is more than I can tell you," answered the old man, as he fidgeted in his chair. "I am only sorry that the raid turned out so badly, and I would give considerable to be able to clean those folks out. What do you suppose they have been doing lately?"

Harry did not attempt to guess.

"There is one of them named Marsh, who went to Mimmsville lately, and there he telegraphed to St. Louis, and I have seen the dispatch. It was directed to Searcy & Co., and was in these words:

"Send down the skylark as soon as possible!"

"Now, who are Searcy & Co., and what did he mean by 'the skylark'?"

"That is too much for me," replied the young man. "Searcy & Co. sounds suspicious, and I have no doubt that those people mean mischief."

"You are right, Harry. Searcy & Co. does sound suspicious, and that brings me to a matter that I want to speak to you about. What broke me up, as Eva went out of here, was a remark she made. She wanted to know who she is, where she had come from, and what she is here for."

"That is what I want to know, too. You have had a secret about that girl for a long time; but I don't know why you should have secrets from me."

"That's a fact, and the time has come when I must tell it. I believe that I am not long for this world, anyhow. I was afraid that if I let it out she would hear of it, and I hoped that things would straighten themselves, so that I would not have to tell it. But they have not. Lock the door, Harry."

Harry Searle rose and locked the door, and his father revived himself with a mixture of whisky and sugar and "greens."

"You must have wondered," he said, "about the girl, and how I got possession of this property. I will tell you the whole story."

"I became acquainted with Francis Searcy, the owner of this place, in the Southern army, in the first year of the war. I knew him then as a rich young widower, with no relatives in the world but an only brother and a baby daughter."

"He was angry with his brother, who did not sympathize with the South. That brother, Charles Searcy, had been living in St. Louis, but had gone to Europe to get out of the way of the war. Frank Searcy had sent his child away,

where it would be well cared for and out of danger, and had thrown himself into the war, as he went into everything, headlong and all over.

"It was then that I met him. He was adjutant of the regiment in which I was a captain, and we became fast friends. He was a hot-headed and reckless fellow, and I, although I was considerably older than he, was just as bad. After a while I saved his life, by carrying him back to the ranks when he had been wounded in a charge. We both got promotion out of that, and were closer friends than ever.

"It was near the end of '63 that he was badly wounded, and at last he was discharged as incurable. I got away on sick leave and brought him home to this place, and here he died, after lingering a while. Before he died he made a will in my favor, leaving me this property."

"That is all straight enough," said the young man, "There is nothing in that to make a secret of."

"It is not as straight as I wish it was, Harry. The fact is that he left me the property in trust for his child. I was to bring the girl home and to live on this place, and to take care of her until she is twenty-one, and then I am bound to turn everything over to her. I brought her here, and Eva Summers is Ella Searcy."

The old man mixed another julep, and looked at his son as if he wanted a suggestion.

"How is it that she don't know who she is?" asked Harry.

"Oh, I fixed up a story for her, about her father getting into trouble and sending her away under a false name, and she has been satisfied until lately."

Harry Searle was silent for a few moments, thinking of the facts that had been presented to him.

"I wish I had known of this before," he then said. "Is there no way to get round that will?"

"Not a sign of a chance, Harry."

"But nobody knows who the girl is, and that is the same as if she was dead."

"If she was dead, Harry, the property would go to his next of kin, and that is his brother Charles who has been in Europe for a long time, but has lately returned to St. Louis. My only hope, you see, is in Eva. If Charles Searcy puts in a claim, I shall have to spring the girl on him. Now you know why I was worried by the words 'Searcy & Co.' in that telegram. I have been hoping that the girl, when she grew up, would marry you, and settle the business for us."

"I would be glad enough to marry her," said the young man; "but you can see that she has not the least notion of taking up with me."

"That is so, Harry, and I am sorry that it is so. But you have been so busy with your science, and building and tinkering, and with our business on the water, that you haven't paid her proper attention. Something must be done before long, or we will all go to everlasting smash."

"What is the matter with you, old man? You are mightily in the dumps nowadays."

"I am afraid that something is going to happen—something that will put an end to business and everything else. Before I go off the

hook I would like to see you married to Eva, and you must make a push, my boy."

"I will do what I can," said Harry.

At this moment a bell jingled.

"They want me down there," said the young man.

His father said that he would go with him, and they left the room together.

CHAPTER XII.

SURPRISES.

SCARCELY had the door closed behind Madison Searle and his son, when the tall mirror at the other end of the library swung inward, and Fred Light and Aaron Hicksey stepped into the room.

"What do you think of that?" asked Fred.

"It is a big thing," replied Aaron. "I reckon we have heard the whole story."

"Yes; we know a good deal more than we knew awhile ago, and now I begin to see what I came down here for. I say, Aaron, we must stop that thing."

"What thing, Fred?"

"We mustn't let them marry Eva to that blaze-faced Harry Searle."

"You may be sure she will never marry him, unless they make her."

"They may make her, or try to. But we will have a finger in that pie, and when they cut it they will find a nest of hornets. *Oh, beeswax!*"

This exclamation was provoked by the sudden appearance of the young lady of whom they were speaking, who opened the library door, and stepped into the room. She was quite as much startled as the young men were, and could only stand and stare, while Fred put his hand on his lips, and Aaron beckoned to her vigorously.

"What are you doing here, and how did you get into the house?" was her first question.

"Hush, Eva!" answered Aaron. "Shut the door, and come here. We've got a big secret to tell you."

The mention of a big secret made her obedient at once. She shut the door, and advanced to where they were standing, but passed beyond them, and looked into the dark hole that was still open behind the mirror.

"By the big horn spoons!" she exclaimed. "What sort of a place is that? Where does it lead to, and how did you find it? Ain't you ashamed of yourselves, to sneak into my guardian's house like a pair of thieves?"

"No, Eva," replied Aaron. "We are not a bit ashamed of ourselves, because we did it for your good, and we have found out the biggest kind of a secret about you—bigger than you could think of guessing."

"About me? What is it?" she eagerly asked.

"I will tell you, if you will promise not to tell anybody that we have been here, and not to say a word about that hole in the wall."

She promised, and demanded that the secret should be surrendered into her keeping without a minute's delay.

"Your real name is not Eva Summers," said Aaron.

"Well, I have had my doubts on that point for some time. Is that all? Who am I, then?"

"Your name is Ella Searcy, and you are the

rightful owner of this house and the whole plantation."

Her eyes fairly danced in her head, and her feet seemed to be ready to strike up a dance on their own account.

"Jimminetti!" she exclaimed. "Is that a sure thing, Aaron?"

"True as gospel, unless Madison Searle lies. We heard him telling the whole story to Harry, a little while ago, in this room. He wants to marry you to his son, so as to keep the property in his family."

"Let him want! I wouldn't have Harry Searle for a husband, if he was the last man in the world."

"But they may try to make you marry him."

"Let them try! They will be apt to get tired. Oh, Aaron! if I am Ella Searcy, and the owner of this place, I will have to launch out and learn to be a lady."

"You don't have much chance for that sort of thing here," suggested Fred Light. "Hadn't you better leave this place? If you will go with us to Aaron Hicksey's house, you will find friends there who will take the best of care of you."

"No you don't!" sharply replied the young lady. "I'm not the sort that runs away, myself. I'm a stickin'-plaster, I am. I mean to stay right here and watch my guardy's little game."

"Will you be sure, then, to keep quiet about us and what we have told you?"

"Oh, I'm fly. Bet your ears. I'll be mum as a mouse. Hark! I hear somebody, coming upstairs. Skedaddle, now, and be quick about it!"

The young men obeyed this rather unlady-like order at once, and the mirror swung to its place behind them as they disappeared in the hole in the wall.

Eva Summers slipped out of the library door and "scooted" away, just in time to miss Madison Searle and his son, who stepped into the room and locked the door behind them.

The old man looked weary and worried, and he mixed a stiffer julep than usual when he seated himself at the table.

"If what Jeff tells us is true," he said, "it does look as if Eva had had something to do with giving information to those interlopers."

"I don't believe that Jeff would lie to us," replied Harry. "We know that those folks got news of our coming in some way, as they were ready to receive us, and Jeff is sure that he saw Eva tie on Hicksey's dog's neck something that looked like a letter, and send him away."

"It does look as if she has been the spy in the camp, though I don't know how she could have got hold of our plans. She said to me a little while ago that there is more than one way to get news out of this house."

"If I thought she had done that trick, old man, I would—"

Harry paused, as though meditating a terrible punishment for the traitor.

"What would you do, Harry?"

"I would marry her anyhow, in spite of herself."

The old man brought his fist down on the ta-

ble with a bang, and finished his julep with an air of triumph.

"That's the ticket!" he exclaimed. "You have hit center this time, Harry. That is the very thing to do, and we must do it at once."

"It is easy enough to say so," replied Harry, "but I don't see how it is to be done."

"Easy as rolling off a log, my boy."

"What! to marry her without her consent, or against her will?"

"Certainly. I wouldn't give an empty bottle for what she says or don't say. You know Sam Mimms, the man I got elected justice of the peace in my place. He will do anything we want, no matter what it is, and do it cheap. We will have him here to-morrow night, and he shall marry you and Eva in this room."

"But he will have to ask her questions," urged Harry, "and she will say no in the strongest style."

"That don't count. I tell you, Harry, there was never a man who can be so hard of hearing when he wants to as that man Mimms. He will swear to anything, too, if that should ever happen to be necessary. Oh, you needn't worry, my boy. The thing is settled. I will send for Mimms, and you shall marry her to-morrow night."

This conversation had been overheard by Fred Light and Aaron Hickey, who were listening intently at the door of the secret entrance. When the plot against Eva was fully developed, they stole quietly down the rickety staircase, and passed through the tunnel to the open air.

"That is what you may call a rough deal," said Fred, when they had emerged from the well-hole.

"It is the meanest game I ever heard of," replied Aaron.

"It might win, though, if we hadn't got hold of the points. But we will break it up, old chap."

"What will we do, Fred?"

"I don't know just yet. If it wasn't for my lame arm, I would be tempted to punch somebody's head, and raise a merry row in that house. But I can't fly high with one wing, and will have to play roots on them, as we used to say up the Ohio."

"Can't you give me a notion of the roots?"

"Not yet. I have an idea, but want to turn it over before I talk about it."

"All right, Fred. I trust in you as I never trusted in anybody before. You have saved my life twice, and have proved yourself a better friend than I had ever hoped to strike. I think more of you than of any other person in the world, except little Eva, and wish I could do something to show you how much I believe in you."

"I don't deserve half of that, old chap," said Fred, "and I wish you would stow it, and step along lively, as we have some big news for our friends at the house."

Before they could tell their news they had to visit Billy Bradley, and satisfy themselves concerning his condition. They found him quite comfortable, though he was very weak from loss of blood, and he could not help fretting about the exciting opportunities he was miss-

ing. The physician had pronounced him out of danger, and had said that with good nursing he would soon be able to get about.

All were anxious to hear the story the young fellows had brought home, as something adventurous was always expected from Fred Light's expeditions; but none listened so eagerly and with such a lively interest as Mat Marsh, though he only spoke with the purpose of bringing out more strongly the points of the narrative.

"That settles it," he said, when the story had been entirely told. "We now understand the precise position of affairs, and after this we will have plain sailing. Speaking emphatically, Fred Light, you are a brick, and Aaron Hicksey is another. The luck and the pluck of you two fellows have brought light out of darkness, and have straightened out a snarl that it would have bothered the best detectives to unravel. I must now let you into a secret of my own, which I would have intrusted to you sooner if I had known you as thoroughly as I now know you.

"I must introduce myself as Charles Searcy, the only brother of Frank Searcy, and the uncle of the girl who has been known to us as Eva Summers. Your interviews in St. Louis were with my confidential clerk, and I shipped on the 'Experiment' for the purpose of satisfying myself of your fitness for the work I wanted you to do, and of cutting out that work as the case should seem to require.

"As Madison Searle said, I have been residing in Europe for a number of years, and only lately have returned to this country. I had heard rumors of a mystery in connection with my dead brother's property and the disappearance of his daughter, and as soon as possible after my return I began to investigate them. I soon discovered that there was no open and straightforward way of getting at the truth, and decided upon the plan which I employed Fred Light and Herman to carry out for me. I am now convinced that it is the best method I could have adopted.

"I had also found reason to believe that Madison Searle was at the head of a gang who were extensively engaged in criminal operations about here—in fact, pirating on the commerce of the river, though it seemed impossible to find out just what they were doing. My friend Harvey Storms, who is a valuable member of the police force in St. Louis, was interested in that line of investigation, and I engaged him to meet me here, and he brought his young friend Bradley, whose pursuit of excitement, I am sorry to say, has brought him into trouble.

"I had suspected that Eva Summers might possibly prove to be Ella Searcy, but had not the slightest proof to support my suspicions. Now that the facts have been discovered, I believe that we will soon be able to settle with Madison Searle and his gang of river pirates.

"The first thing necessary will be to protect the young lady from their plots, and Fred tells me that he has an idea, which we will take into consideration before attempting to do anything. Of course we want to carry our work through without any more fighting, if we can."

CHAPTER XIII.

FLATBOAT FRED'S "IDEE."

FRED LIGHT did have an "idee" in his head, which was usually well supplied with such commodities. He slept upon it, matured it, was suited with it, and in the morning, with the approbation of Charles Searcy, he went to work upon it.

The development of this "idee" required consultation with several young persons among the colored population, and the payment to them of various small sums of money. The young Africans, being thus excited to activity, bestirred themselves in searching certain portions of the Hicksey plantation, and the result of their labors was brought to Fred in a small wooden box, with a sliding lid, which neither he nor his friends cared to open, and which was placed out of doors until it should be wanted, as if its presence in the house was decidedly objectionable.

The next evening Fred and Aaron set out to visit the Searcy mansion, by way of the underground passage, Fred carrying the box, and both wearing their pistols in their belts.

They did not lack for company on this occasion, as they were backed by Charles Searcy and Harvey Storms, both well armed, Herman Schweitopfel being left behind to guard the house and take care of the wounded reporter.

When they had reached the little cellar under the house, they took off their shoes, and quietly ascended the rickety staircase, Fred and Aaron in the lead, until they came to the secret door that had been so useful to them in their spying expeditions.

At this door Fred listened intently, while the others kept strict silence.

Hearing no sound, and becoming satisfied that no person was within, he cautiously opened the door, and peered into the room. A light was burning dimly, but nobody was visible.

He quickly opened his box by pulling the lid, and poured out its contents upon the floor.

The contents were three young black snakes, two garter snakes, and a chicken snake.

Fred hastily withdrew the box from the opening and closed the door.

"Is it all right, Fred?" whispered Mr. Searcy.

"As right as I could make it," he answered.

"Very well. Watch the performances as closely as you can. If your little scheme should fail to work, we will run in and surprise them."

Fred fastened his eye to a hole that he had bored in the wall, and looked and listened.

Madison Searle, in the mean time, was in a lower room, consulting with Sam Mimms, the justice of the peace whom he had mentioned to Harry as being under his influence. Mimms was a fat, low-browed man, with a greasy face and small eyes, whose countenance stamped him as not only a brute himself, but a fit instrument for the brutality of others.

"Now, Sam," said Madison Searle, "I suppose you know what you are wanted to do, and what you are to get for it, and that you are ready to go to work."

"That's all right," replied Mimms, with a wink. "It is easy enough to do, and I will

guarantee to put that little job through so quick that it would make your head swim."

"Come up-stairs, then, and we will get at it."

As they passed into the halliway, Madison Searle opened the door of another room, in which were Eva Summers and his son, the girl seated at a table, and the young man standing near her.

"I wish you would step up into the library a few minutes, Eva," he said. "I have something to show you, and a big secret to tell you."

It was natural that she should associate the "big secret" with the revelation made to her by Aaron Hicksey, and she jumped at the proposition.

"All right, guardy," she answered. "I'll be up there in a jiffy."

"Bring her up, Harry, if you don't mind," said the old man, and he led "Judge" Mimms up-stairs.

He opened the library door, and closed it behind his companion. Then he stepped to the table and turned up the light, which had been burning dimly.

"This ain't much of a place, Sam, though I have fixed it up a little," he said; "but I have taken a fancy to it lately, and attend to most of my business here. Oh, good Heavens! what's that?"

He stopped suddenly, pointing at a corner of the room, and his purple face turned ashy pale, and his outstretched arm shook, and his whole frame trembled.

"I've got 'em!" exclaimed the old man, clutching his companion's arm. "Oh, I've got 'em at last! Look there, Mimms! Do you see that? Do you see anything?"

Mimms looked in the direction pointed out, and saw a snake in the corner, partly coiled and partly erect, with its beady eyes fastened upon him, and its tongue in rapid motion.

"It's a—a—snake!" he answered, in a hoarse whisper, as he, also, trembled like a leaf.

"You see it? Then you've got 'em, too. Mercy on us! there's another!—and another! The room is full of snakes. Help! Help!"

Harry Searle, who was coming up the stairs, followed by Eva Summers, heard this cry, and ran in.

"What's the matter, father?" he asked.

"I've got 'em!" shrieked the old man. "Oh, Harry, I've got 'em bad!"

"Got what?"

"The horrors. I see snakes. The room is full of them. Look there! Look!"

Harry did look, and he saw them.

"There's nothing the matter with you," he said. "Those are real snakes; but how the dogs did they ever get in here?"

His father did not reply. He had fallen on the floor in a fit.

Harry opened the door, and called:

"Tyson! come up here quick. Go back, Eva. The old man is sick."

Tyson came running up, and with his assistance and that of Mimms, who had partially recovered from his fit, Madison Searle was carried into another room. Fred Light, who was looking and listening at the secret door, communi-

cated the result of the experiment to his companions.

"So your trick has worked finely," said Mr. Searcy.

"Yes, sir; the snakes have played their game well so far. But I reckon we had better wait here a while, and see if anything else turns up."

Nearly half an hour passed before the library door was opened again. Then Harry Searle and Tyson came in with sticks, and hasted to kill the snakes.

"This is the strangest thing I ever saw or heard of," said the young man. "The room is as tight as a drum, and I would like to know how those cussed snakes got in here."

"It is the devil's doin's," replied Tyson. "This is a queer old house, anyhow, and I sometimes think it is haunted."

"The devil or the ghosts have spoiled a nice piece of work for me."

"Is the old man going to give up the job, Harry?"

"I hope not. When he came out of the fit he told Mimms to call here to-morrow or next day. But he won't get over this shock very soon, I am afraid."

The two men poked the dead snakes out of the door with their sticks and left the library.

"That settles it," said Mr. Searcy, when Fred Light reported to him the conversation he had just heard. "They will not be likely to play that game again very soon, and in the meantime something may happen to them that will astonish them."

The party quietly left the house and went home, highly elated with the successful carrying out of Fred Light's "idee."

The next morning the occupants of Aaron Hicksey's house were aroused at daybreak, and Mr. Searcy caused a pair of horses to be hitched to a farm wagon, and set off for the railroad station at Mimmsville, accompanied by Harvey Storms, Herman Schweitopfel, Fred Light and a colored man to drive, Aaron Hicksey being left at home to take care of the house and Billy Bradley.

"I am going after 'the skylark,'" was the only information the leader would give his companions in answer to their questions, and this left upon their minds the impression that the expedition was likely to be a dangerous one.

"The name of Mimmsville is suspicious enough," said Fred, "and I've a notion that 'the skylark' is something that may go up."

When Mimmsville was reached there was nothing formidable in its appearance. There were but half a dozen houses in the settlement, and one of those was the small building that served as the railroad, passenger and freight depot, and telegraph office.

Mr. Searcy and Harvey Storms alighted and went into the station-house, returning soon with a square box, which they carried by a handle between them, though it seemed to be an easy load for one. They placed this box on a bundle of straw in the wagon and wrapped about it some quilts, which they had brought from the Hicksey place.

"Hope it won't freeze," muttered Fred, wiping the perspiration from his brow as he eyed this proceeding suspiciously.

A colored man who was hanging about the depot came and spoke to Mr. Searcy as that gentleman took his seat in the wagon.

"Dar's been a lot o' men spyin' about yar," he said, "an' dey went up de road 'arly dis mawnin'."

Searcy gave the man some money, and the wagon started on its return trip.

"It don't look as if all four of us were needed to bring that little box," remarked Fred, whose curiosity kept cropping out.

"But all four of us may be needed to guard it," replied Mr. Searcy. "The fact is, my friend, I have reason to expect an attack on the way home, and we may be put to our trumps to save 'the skylark' and ourselves."

This statement caused the others to open their eyes and examine their weapons; but they rode on in silence, trusting in the sagacity and skill of their leader.

All was plain sailing while the road ran through the open country, but when it descended a hill and entered a dense forest the wagon was halted.

All but the driver alighted, and Mr. Searcy divided his command into two squads. He and Herman Schweitopfel took the left-hand side of the road, sending Harvey Storms and Fred Light to the right. Each squad was to scout through the wood near the road and the driver was to follow slowly.

Searcy and his heavy companion moved forward slowly and as cautiously as possible. The heavy timber and the thick undergrowth made their progress difficult, and they were obliged to keep a sharp lookout ahead for fear of running into an ambuscade, their object being to surprise their possible enemies instead of being surprised by them.

In this undertaking they were more successful than they had hoped to be.

They had got about half-way through the wood, when Mr. Searcy suddenly came to a halt, seized his companion by the arm, and pointed ahead.

Herman looked, and saw two men lying by the side of a log near the road, on which their two rifles were resting. They were evidently too intent upon watching the road to take notice of anything in their rear or on their flanks.

The two scouts whispered together, and stealthily approached the ambuscaders.

"Good-morning," said Searcy, quietly.

The men looked up, and stared into the muzzles of two revolvers, which decidedly "had the drop" on them.

"Drop those guns, and throw up your hands!" ordered Searcy.

They obeyed, and Herman stepped up and disarmed them.

"Now scatter into the woods, and be quick about it!" was the next order.

The two men sneaked away into the forest at a pretty rapid rate. Searcy and Herman picked up the abandoned weapons, and ran across the road, where the noise of a scuffle told them that their friends had got into trouble.

The other squad, in fact, had "caught a Tartar."

Moving more swiftly and less carefully than Searcy and Herman, they had passed beyond those two, and had suddenly stumbled upon an ambuscade where their enemies outnumbered them.

The encounter was so sudden and unexpected that neither side had a chance to use any other weapons than those with which nature had provided them.

Storms and Fred were going ahead silently enough, when they slipped through some bushes down the side of a little ravine near a brook, falling upon four men who were doubtless waiting for the wagon that carried "the skylark," and immediately they were engaged in a hand-to-hand struggle.

The lad struck out finely, considering his lame arm, and put all his science into the encounter. Storms also did wonders with his trained and hardened muscles; but he had hurt his ankle in the fall, and the superior numbers and weight of their antagonists were telling against them, when Charles Searcy and Herman came running to their assistance, and the ambuscaders were speedily put to flight.

The captured weapons were placed in the wagon when it came up, and the party reached home without any further adventure.

Mr. Searcy and Herman drove on to the river, where they buried "the skylark" near the bank, and carefully concealed the spot.

CHAPTER XIV.

A TRAGIC EVENT.

CHARLES SEARCY had said that before long something might happen that would astonish Madison Searle and his comrades, and he intended that something of the sort should happen.

He proposed to begin an active campaign against the man whom he believed to be wrongfully in possession of his brother's property, and prepared to commence operations the day after he had safely brought "the skylark" from Mimmsville.

On the afternoon of that day he started from Aaron Hicksey's house for the river, taking Harvey Storms as his only companion, and telling the others to amuse themselves as they pleased during his absence.

"We will find enough to do," said Fred Light. "Aaron wants to try to get an interview with the young lady at the Searcy house, and I reckon he will be safe enough if he goes alone. I have a little scheme on hand, too. If Herman will go with me, I want to scout around that queer building at the head of the bayou, and find out what it is made of."

"I am not sure that it is a good scheme," said Mr. Searcy. "I would advise you not to go too near that building this evening."

"Oh, we will look out for snags and cross-currents."

Mr. Searcy and Harvey Storms went to the river, carrying their pistols and a hand-drill for working in iron. The St. Louis athlete limped a little on the way, though he declared that his injured ankle did not trouble him any more.

They launched the skiff that had been saved from the wreck of the "Experiment," and which had been concealed in the bushes since

the disaster to the flatboat. Then they dug up "the skylark," lifted it out of the hole in which it had been buried, and carefully placed it in the boat. Mr. Searcy sat in the stern of the skiff, with the box between his legs, and Storms took the oars.

"Pretty ticklish piece of property, that," remarked the latter, as he eyed the next box.

"Perfectly harmless except when irritated, as the showman said of his tiger," replied Searcy. "The safety or danger of such an article depends upon the style in which it is handled."

"I hope you know how to handle it. Where did the name of 'skylark' come from?"

"It just happened. It was agreed upon as a cipher, before I left St. Louis, in case I should want to send for it."

"What made you think that you might want to use anything of that sort?"

"I had my theory of what was going on here pretty definitely formed, aided by your experience, and had laid my plans accordingly. It seemed to me that if that water-devil was such as I supposed it to be, and such as I believe it has turned out to be, an instrument of this kind would be just the thing to make an end of it. So I had 'the skylark' rigged up to suit my ideas, and I think we will have a good chance to test its ability as a pirate-catcher."

"For my part," said Storms, "I will be glad to get rid of the thing, and I hope it will do its work well."

Storms pulled softly down the river with the current, rounded the bend, passed the Searcy mansion, and turned up the bayou which Fred Light had described to his friends. It was then twilight on the river, and nearly dark under the shade of the great trees that overhung the quiet inlet.

The skiff was rowed up the bayou as silently as possible, and into the mass of foliage that closed the upper end.

"Be careful of your bird of paradise, and don't let it flop over," said Storms, as he parted the branches and made way for the skiff to reach the iron gate or door of which Fred had spoken.

It was there, as the lad had described it, with its lower edge reaching just under the surface of the water.

Storms held his ear against the iron for a few minutes, but heard nothing.

Then he took up his drill, and in a little while, working under the directions of his companion, bored two holes through the iron plate. He then changed places with Searcy, who transferred himself and his box from the stern of the skiff to the bow.

Searcy's first move was to sound the depth of the water with a plumb line. Having satisfied himself on this point, he turned his attention to the box.

This was a neat case of oak, having a hinged lid, which was fastened with a padlock.

Searcy opened the padlock with a key of his own, raised the lid, took out a quantity of cotton, and carefully brought forth something that looked like a tin can. He set this down in the bottom of the boat, while Storms shrunk back in his seat, and proceeded to fasten to each side

a wire, measuring the length. To each wire he attached a hook.

Then he took from the box two larger pieces of wire and screwed them into two sides of the can—an operation which caused Storms to shut his eyes and grit his teeth.

Having cleared away the foliage for a considerable space near the holes that Storms had bored, he let the can over the bow of the boat into the water, gradually sinking it until it hung by the hooks which he fastened in the two holes.

"All right now, Harvey," he said. "You can get out of this as soon as you want to."

Storms gave an audible sigh of relief, caught a branch that hung behind the stern, and with a vigorous pull sent the skiff out into the open water. Then he took his seat at the oars, begging his companion to get into the stern at once, and with swift strokes rowed for the river.

"I declare to you, Searcy," he said, "never in my life have I felt myself so near eternity as during the past fifteen minutes."

Aaron Hicksey set out on his expedition shortly after Mr. Searcy and Harvey Storms had left the house. He was accompanied by Fred Light and Herman Schweitopfel, who went with him as far as the well-hole, and then, wishing him good luck, prepared to make a scout in the vicinity of the Searcy mansion.

As the underground passage had come to be regarded as a sure and safe way of getting inside of the Searcy house, Aaron carried a small lantern, which he lighted at the bottom of the well-hole. Then he had no difficulty in making his way to the little cellar and up the rickety stairs to the secret door.

He knew that the success of his undertaking depended mainly upon luck, and that the chances were largely against him. There was a possibility that he might see Eva in the library, and this was all he had to bank upon. She had come in there once before, and she might come again. He would wait and see.

He did wait a long time, with his eye at the hole that his friend Fred had made in the door; but he neither saw nor heard anything. The room was dark and silent, and Aaron began to believe that it was shunned by all the household since the snakes had been discovered in it.

At last, as he was about to turn away, sadly disappointed, the library door opened quickly, and Eva stepped in, carrying a light.

More than that—she set the light on the table, walked to the secret door, and, greatly to the surprise of the young man, tapped at the side of the mirror.

He quickly opened the door, and greeted her as warmly as his bashfulness would allow.

"I have been waiting here a long time," he said, "hoping to get a chance to speak to you, but was about to give it up as a bad job."

"You wouldn't have seen me here in a month of Sundays," she answered, "if I hadn't known that you were waiting."

"How did you find that out?"

"I saw your friend outside—that nice young fellow with the curly hair—and he told me that you wanted to see me. So I ran up, though I am deathly afraid of snakes."

"There will be no snakes here to hurt you, Eva. We put those snakes in the room. Do you know why we did it?"

"I couldn't begin to think of guessing."

"It was to give the old man, Madison Searle, a good scare. He was going to marry you to his son that night, whether you were willing or not, and had brought Squire Mimms here to do the job."

"Jimminy cracky!" exclaimed the young lady. "Was that his little game? And was that the big secret he wanted to tell me? He would have had a gay old time getting ahead of this girl; but I am much obliged to you for starting the snake racket, all the same."

"As you must see that you are not safe here," urged Aaron, "and as you know that you are really Ella Searcy—"

She broke in with the remark that she believed it, anyhow.

"And as your uncle, Mr. Charles Searcy, is with us, I think you ought to leave this place and go over to my house, where your uncle will take good care of you, and will see that you get your rights."

"I don't know but you are right, Aaron," she replied; "but these folks can't hurt me, and I would rather think over the matter a little before I change my base."

"I wish," said Aaron, with a deep blush, "that I had the right to take care of you as my wife."

"Now please, Aaron, don't shoot off your tongue like that. We are such good friends that you oughtn't to spoil it. I don't want to be anybody's wife, and I don't care for anybody in that way."

"Not even for my friend, the nice young man with the curly hair?"

"Just for nobody at all," she replied; but it was then her turn to blush.

A slight noise caused Aaron to look up, and he saw Harry Searle standing in the doorway, his blotched face dark with anger, and a cocked revolver in his right hand.

Eva begged her young friend to run; but he did not stir, though the secret door was open behind him.

"So I have found out your secret," said young Searle. "It is you who have been sneaking into this house and spying around, and it was you who turned loose the snakes in this room."

Aaron made no answer, and Harry addressed himself to Eva.

"And this is the way, miss, that you disobey your guardian's orders, and meet your lover here, in his own house."

"I have no lover!" indignantly replied Eva.

"You shall have one no longer," retorted Harry Searle.

He raised his revolver quickly and fired.

Aaron Hicksey fell backward on the floor with a bullet through his brain.

Eva cast herself down by the side of her murdered friend and burst into tears.

Harry Searle stood silent for a moment, as if appalled by what he had done. Then he approached Eva and took her by the arm.

"Come," he said. "This is no place for you."

She shook herself loose and started up and faced him.

"It is no place for you!" she exclaimed. "Hell is the only place that is fit for you, you cowardly murderer!"

"You had better be careful, you young vixen," said he, "or I may serve you the same way."

"Do it!" she shouted. "Shoot me if you dare, you cowardly dog, you bloody-minded murderer!"

The jingling of a bell was heard, and Harry Searle hastily left the room.

CHAPTER XV.

THE SKYLARK AT WORK.

AFTER parting from Aaron Hicksey, Fred and Herman wandered about the grounds attached to the Searcy mansion.

As the day was not yet done, although the sun was near its setting they moved cautiously, keeping among the trees and shrubbery, and at a considerable distance from the house.

The grounds had been so long neglected, and the bushes and weeds were so dense and rank, that after a while they lost their way, and there was nothing but the setting sun to give them an indication of their whereabouts.

Taking their bearings as well as they could, they worked their way in what they supposed to be the direction of the house, and soon came in sight of a shabby and ill-kept garden.

"Dere vas somepody," said Herman.

"Who is it?" asked Fred.

"A beddigood."

"What in thunder is a beddigood?"

"Dot girrel."

Fred looked as his friend pointed, and saw Eva Summers leaning on an old fence, gazing abstractedly at things in general. He hastened to her, and was welcomed with a smile and a blush.

"I wish you would run up to the room where you saw us the other day," he said. "Aaron has gone up there, by the way you know of, and he wants to see you."

"I don't know as I would give a cent to see Aaron Hicksey," replied the young lady, and her look indicated that she was not displeased with her present company.

"But he has some news to tell you—something you ought to know."

"I suppose I must go, then. What are you doing here?"

"No harm. We are all right."

She turned away rather reluctantly, and Fred and Herman took up their scout again.

As they then knew where they were, they had no difficulty in finding their way to the "queer building" at the head of the bayou.

Concealing themselves behind a clump of bushes, they looked across a small piece of ground from which the trees and brush had been removed, and saw the structure which Fred Light had for some time been longing to examine more closely.

It was a low and narrow brick building, seeming to be solidly built, and covered with a rounded iron roof. There were no windows in it, but a narrow iron door was visible on the east side.

"There is the shebang," said Fred, "in which that devil-fish, or whatever it is, makes its home."

"Dot vas a mighty queer place, anyhow," replied Herman.

"We will wait here a little while, and then we will cross over and take a closer look at it."

"Aber I likes not to fool mit dot tyfel," remarked Herman. "Dere vas some odder man who goes by dot house."

Looking toward the east, Fred saw an old man and a younger one walking toward the building, and then quite near it. In the elderly man he recognized Madison Searle.

Those two stopped and exchanged a few words, and the younger man hastened away. Madison Searle walked quickly to the brick building, opened the door, and went in.

"Let us get behind that big tree," said Fred Light, "and wait until the old man comes out."

The two scouts concealed themselves behind a large oak. It was then quite dark, but the sky was clear, and the stars were coming out.

Shortly another man came running down from the house, and Fred believed him to be Harry Searle, though it was too dark to distinguish his features. He, also, entered the "queer building."

"There is some sort of deviltry going on in there," said Fred, "and I am crazy to get a sight of it."

"Yoost you wait," replied Herman. "It don't been safe to fool mit dot tyfel."

In a few minutes the old man came out, and walked toward the house.

Hardly had he passed beyond the range of vision of the scouts behind the tree, when there came a rumbling sound, followed by a dull, heavy explosion.

Herman quickly put his arm around his young companion, and drew him close against the broad trunk of the oak.

The next moment the air was filled with flying bricks and fragments of iron and wood, that fell thickly around them, and many of the missiles came crashing through the branches of the tree that sheltered them.

When Charles Searcy and Harvey Storms had got clear of the bayou and into the swift current of the Mississippi, Storms headed the skiff up-stream, rowing only sufficiently to keep it in position opposite the inlet from which they had emerged.

"Did you really feel as if you were in a tight place?" asked Searcy.

"I did, indeed. I confess that a cold sweat came out all over me, and I actually shivered."

"I thought you had more nerve, Harvey Storms."

"I believe I have plenty of nerve when I am doing a ticklish job myself; but when some other fellow is handling bottled lightning, I am afraid that he may happen to break the glass."

"I was as careful as a man could be, and we are safe now, whoever else may be in danger."

"That suits me; but is it worth while to wait here any longer?"

"This is not a bad place to stay," replied Searcy. "The air is cool on the water, and we

are clear of mosquitoes, which is quite a comfort. Let us wait here half an hour or so, and it is just possible that something may happen. I would give a good pile if 'the skylark' would catch on to something, and show us how it does its work."

"That would be worth waiting for, surely."

Hardly had these words escaped the lips of Storms, when the two men suddenly looked at each other, and then at the bayou. The water quivered under the skiff, and a dark mass shot up into the air at the head of the inlet.

The next moment the boat was rocking on the waves, and the fragments of the explosion began to rain down about them. Fortunately they were not struck, and directly all was quiet again.

"Pull in, Storms! Pull in quick!" excitedly exclaimed Searcy.

Harvey Storms settled back to his oars, and rowed with strong and swift strokes up the bayou.

Madison Searle was pacing the graveled walk in front of his house, just before dark, when a young man came running toward him from the direction of the river.

"What is it?" he impatiently asked, as the runner waited to recover his breath.

"A big broadhorn, and you will have to hurry, as she is right near."

"Where is she?" asked the old man, quickening his steps in the direction of the house at the head of the inlet.

"Not more'n a mile above the bend. The island hid her from me."

"All right. We won't be likely to miss her. Hurry up and get the boys ready, and I will attend to the rest of the business."

The man hastened away, and Madison Searle walked rapidly down to the brick building.

Taking a heavy key from his pocket, he unlocked the iron door and went in, removing the key, closing the door behind him, and bolting it on the inside.

He turned up the light of a hanging lamp at the north end, and the interior of the establishment was pretty plainly visible.

It was like a bath-house, more than anything else—walls of plain brick, with an arched iron roof, inclosing a mass of dark and quiet water, which reached nearly up to a narrow wooden platform that ran around three of the sides. In one corner there was a wooden closet on the platform, but no other furniture or impediments.

Just over the water, hanging by chains from heavy beams under the roof, was a strange object.

It was a cigar-shaped vessel of iron, about twenty-five feet in length, with a three-bladed screw at the north end, and similar but smaller screws on each side near the bottom, in the position of the ventral fins of a fish. On the top, near the south end, was a sort of short horn, some two feet high, in the forward face of which was set an oval piece of thick glass.

Madison Searle stepped to one side of the building, and jerked a bell-pull. Then he paced excitedly up and down the platform.

"What is the matter with Harry?" he mut-

tered, as he looked at his watch. "I never knew him to wait so long. He is always crazy to start."

Directly there was a knock at the iron door, and he opened it, admitting his son, who was breathless from running.

"What kept you, Harry?" asked the old man. "I was never in such a hurry before, and you were never so late."

"I will tell you directly. What's up?"

"There is a big prize in sight, just above the bend, and not a minute to lose."

"I will get off at once, then, though I feel mighty queer."

The young man stepped to the cigar-shaped craft, and turned a screw in the side. A small door flew open, revealing a lighted interior and some bright machinery.

"Are you all right in there, Steve?" he asked, as he looked in.

"All right!" replied a hoarse voice.

"Shut off the air valve, then!"

"I say, old man, continued Harry, turning to his father, "you must be sure to get the boys down to the point in time."

"I will attend to that. I wish you would hurry."

"All right. I say, old man, I have shot Aaron Hicksey."

"Shot Aaron Hicksey?"

"Yes; he is dead, up at the house."

With these words Harry Searle crawled in at the little door, and it closed behind him with a clang.

The old man turned a screw in the side of the building, and the chains automatically descended and unhooked themselves from the monster, which then lay motionless, its back just showing above the water.

A sort of churning noise followed, and Madison Searle left the building, locking the door behind him.

"Shot Aaron Hicksey!" he muttered, as he stepped pretty rapidly up the graveled walk.

"I wonder what that means. It is a good thing if the young imp is dead; but it is horrible to think that Harry has killed him."

He had gone but a few steps further, when the ground trembled under his feet, and a heavy explosion shook the air. He turned at once, and saw the utter destruction of the building he had just left.

Regardless of the flying and falling fragments, he ran with tottering steps back to the ruins.

CHAPTER XVI.

FRED LIGHT'S FORTUNE.

HARDLY had the missiles ceased to rain around them when Fred Light and Herman Schweitopfel darted out from behind the big oak tree, and ran toward the ruined building.

The explosion had mainly spent its force upward and downward, shattering what it did not carry away; but a portion of the north wall had been left, and against this the hanging lamp, still burning brightly, dangled from its hook.

At the foot of this wall the greater part of the narrow platform also remained, and on the

platform was Madison Searle, bareheaded and wild-eyed, walking excitedly to and fro, and talking to himself.

"Oh, Harry! my poor Harry!" he exclaimed, in a broken voice, full of agony and despair. "Oh, Harry! my poor Harry! All is lost! All is gone!"

At that moment a skiff, propelled by the strong arms of Harvey Storms, shot into the open basin, and Charles Searcy, standing up in the stern, looked Madison Searle in the face.

"Frank Searcy!" screamed the distracted old man. "Frank Searcy! The dead has come back!"

With the quickness of thought he drew a pistol, pressed the muzzle against his right temple, and fired. As the report broke the oppressive silence, he fell forward into the water, and sunk without a struggle.

Fred and Herman ran down on the platform, and Harvey Storms landed the skiff there, and he and Mr. Searcy came ashore.

"That settles it," said the latter. "That is the end of it all."

"It is a sad end," replied Storms, "but no doubt a just one. 'The skylark' did its work well."

"A dynamite torpedo, my boy, and it has blown up the thing that wrecked the 'Experiment.'"

"What sort of a thing was it?"

"I suppose it must have been an iron boat of some kind, that ran under the water. It will run no more now, as it lies at the bottom of the bayou. I mean to fish it up before long, if there is anything left of it, and find out what it was made of. Come, my friends; as there is nothing more for us to do here, we had better go up to the house and explain matters to my niece, who must have heard the explosion."

They found that young lady wandering down the walk, evidently in great distress. As soon as she saw them she ran to them and seized the arm of Fred Light.

"What is the matter?" she asked.

"The fact is," answered Fred, "that there has been a big blow-up, and Madison Searle and his son are dead."

"Dead? Mercy on us! How sudden! But I don't mind much about that, as they were awfully mean. Somebody better than they is dead, and I have been nearly frightened out of my wits."

"Who else is dead?"

"Aaron Hicksey, poor fellow."

"Aaron dead? How did it happen, and where, and when?"

"To-night—up in the library. Harry Searle found him talking there with me, and shot him dead, and he is lying there on the floor."

They hastened to the house, and found no one to dispute their entrance but the man named Tyson, who demanded to be informed who they were and what they wanted.

"My name is Charles Searcy," replied that gentleman, "and I take possession of these premises in behalf of this young lady, Miss Ella Searcy, who is my niece and the owner of the plantation. As for you, sir, I have to inform you that your infernal machine is blown up, that Harry Searle has gone to the bottom with

it, that Madison Searle has killed himself, that all your rascally work is known, and that if you want to escape the law you had better get out of the way as fast as you can."

Tyson said nothing, but sneaked away, and was not seen about the place again.

"Are you really my uncle, mister?" asked Ella Searcy, convinced at last that she was no longer Eva Summers.

"Yes, my dear, I am your dead father's only brother, and I mean to take the best care I can of you and your property."

"That will be dreadfully nice; but I am afraid you will find me a bad egg."

"Not a bit of it. You have suffered by being kept in bad company; but we will soon remedy all that."

They went up-stairs to the library, where the secret door was still standing open, and Aaron Hicksey was lying on the floor as he had fallen.

There was genuine grief in their hearts and their eyes as they looked at his dead body; for, during their brief acquaintance with him, they had grown to love the open-hearted young fellow, and to respect him for his generous and manly qualities.

Some of Aaron's servants were sent for, and were directed to convey his body to his own house, and prepare it for burial.

The funeral took place on the second day after his death, and at his grave there were no truer mourners than "the niggers," who had been permitted to manage his plantation to suit themselves.

After the funeral Mr. Searcy took Fred Light aside, and made an important communication to him.

"Our young friend who is dead was very fond of you, my boy," he said.

"I liked him right well, too," replied Fred.

"Though I laughed at him when I first saw him, I took quite a fancy to him after I had found him out."

"He proved his liking for you by something that will surprise you. A few days before his death he came to me, and said that he was alone in the world, with no living relative that he knew of. If he should die, he supposed that his property would go to the State, unless he should leave it to 'the niggers.' He told me that he had formed a strong liking for you,

who had twice saved his life at the risk of your own—"

"That was nothing," interrupted Fred.

"He thought it was something, and said that he would like to make such a will as would secure his property to you, in case he should happen to die suddenly. I favored the idea, and drew the will, which he signed, and it was witnessed by Harvey Storms and myself. I said nothing to you about it, as his death was far from my thoughts; but he has been called away, and you are now the owner of this fine plantation."

"I would rather have Aaron alive again than to own the plantation," said Fred.

"I believe you, my boy; but at the same time it is a piece of property that is well worth owning. Aaron told me that under the management of the hands it brought him in as much as three thousand dollars a year, and I believe that it would bring five thousand with better care."

Mr. Searcy sent for his family, which consisted of his wife and two children, who were to stay with Ella in the old Searcy mansion, until he could straighten up the plantation and her affairs generally.

Madison Searle's body was recovered and given proper burial, as was also the body of his son Harry, as soon as the Devilfish could be raised. That infernal machine had been so badly torn to pieces that its exact construction could never be ascertained, and it is certain that the commerce of the river was no longer molested in the vicinity of the Searcy plantation.

Billy Bradley was soon strong enough to be taken to his home in St. Louis, whither he was accompanied by Harvey Storms, and he wrote a thrilling account of his adventures down the river.

Aaron Hicksey's will was proved, and Fred Light settled down on his plantation, with Herman Schweitopfel as his constant companion and aid. The position of a land-owner, with an independent fortune was quite pleasing to him while the novelty lasted; but it was not long before his roving disposition led him away, and the hands who had "run" the place in Aaron's time had no reason to regret the change of owners.

THE END.

BEADLE'S POCKET LIBRARY.

- 252 Denver Doll's Device; or, The Detective Queen. By Edward L. Wheeler.
- 253 The Boy Tenderfoot; or, Roaring Ben Bundy of Colorado. By Capt. Mark Wilton.
- 254 Black Hills Ben; or, Dutch Jan on the War-Path. By Maj. Lewis W. Carson.
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